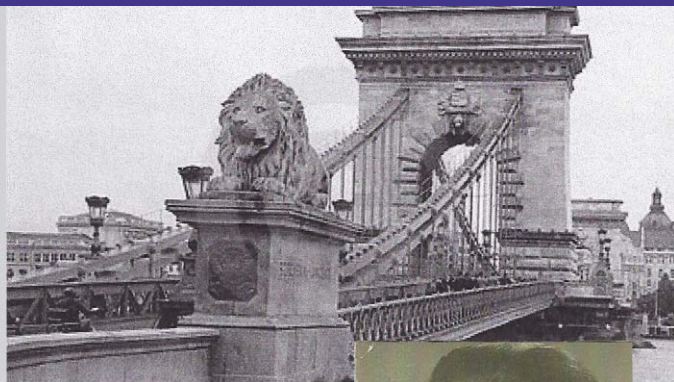
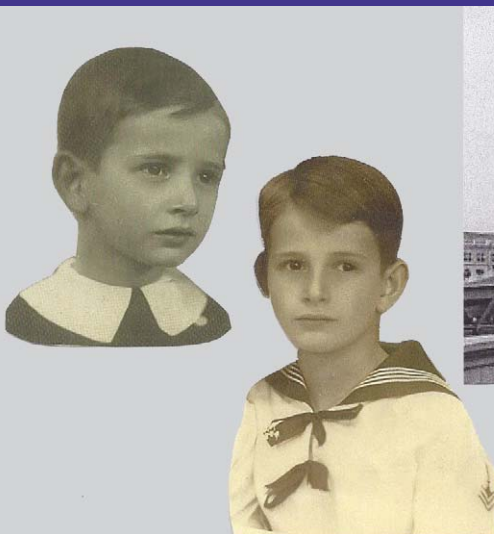


FEARS AND FREEDOM: My Life Story

László Somogyi



FEARS and FREEDOM

My Life Story

by
László Somogyi



Fears and Freedom

My Life Story

LÁSZLÓ SOMOGYI

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Why I am doing this?

August 17, 1999 – Maybe today is the proper time to break the barrier of the “blank page” syndrome. I have experienced this phenomenon every time I need to write an article. Although I have published over 60 technical papers and hundreds of research reports, this syndrome has never gone away, and in fact, intensifies, when I have to deal with personal memories.

However, it is a proper time to start: My sons Peter and George encouraged me to do so for a long time. But I always found a good excuse for delaying. There is a lot to tell: mostly bad or even horrible happenings during the first 56 years of the twentieth century and increasingly fortunate times following our arrival in America in 1957. Therefore, I recommend reading this family story only in small increments.

Please, do not become overly depressed: keep it in mind that there is a very happy ending to my personal story. My only wish is that my grandparents, having died so cruelly during the Holocaust, somehow could know about the future of their offspring. I think my grandchildren Rianna, Matthew and Jenelle will someday be interested in learning about their family background, just as I wish I could have known much more about my great-grandparents' lives.

My background

My background

As Rianna, - clever as always - recognized within minutes of her birth, I have an accent. Hungary is my native country where I spent the first 25 years of my life. As a consequence of having made the wrong choice of being born in Budapest, I had to cope frequently with severe problems of discrimination and death threats. Yet my upbringing in Budapest established my character, style, interests and philosophy for the rest of my life. Even more importantly, in 1948 at a young age, I met Marika in Budapest. We got married in Budapest in 1951 and, as I repeat to myself every day, our marriage has been the most fortunate event of my life (I realize this may sound corny, but I cannot express it in any other way).

I will not bother to write much about the geography and history of Hungary; that information is available in books and on the Internet. But, to follow the family story, some references and explanations will be necessary to indicate what happened there during my childhood. Therefore, whenever I feel it is necessary, I will provide bits of my highly subjective, or perhaps even prejudiced, views of Hungary.

I will start by telling my life story, hoping not to run into the same problem that a Hungarian writer had when he wanted to write his life history. He began with the sentence, "My life was similar to....", but could not finish the sentence, because his life had no similarity to anything.

The first period of my life to March 19, 1944

I was born in 1931 in Budapest - and I must complement my parents for the courage - or ignorance - to start a family at that time. That year marked a worldwide depression and the beginning of the Nazi era in Germany. Although no one could predict that millions of Jews would be killed over the next 14 years, Hitler already had his fearful anti-Semitic rallies. I assume that my father István, usually called “Pista” (Stephen in English), felt secure, having a steady job working for the Hungarian government as part of the staff of the Hungarian Head of State, Admiral Horthy Miklós¹. He was the chief horticulturist of the beautiful royal gardens and resided in one of the satellite buildings of the Royal palace complex. My father enjoyed high professional esteem because of his unique training and knowledge of horticulture. Moreover, he and his entire family were fully assimilated into Hungarian society. While anti-Semitism had existed for a long time in Hungary, Jews, especially in the capital, enjoyed leading positions in commerce, the arts and the sciences. Hungary was still officially called: “The Kingdom of Hungary,” even though the last Hapsburg emperor (actually “Kaiser”) of the Austro-Hungarian-Czech Monarchy had lived in exile since 1919. As mentioned before, the head of the state was Admiral Horthy, a sort of benevolent military dictator, who saved Hungary from a brief communist take-over in 1919. During World War II officially Hungary was allied with Germany, but Horthy was trying to minimize German influence. Also, he liked flowers, visiting the greenhouses and gardens almost daily where he was usually escorted by my father. I often saw Horthy and even talked with him – notable events because obviously very few elementary school age kids had the opportunity to talk to a Head of State.

1 For Hungarian names the local rule is used: family name first, given name second.

The family on my father's side

The effects of the worldwide financial crisis known as the “Great Depression” touched my father’s family severely. I inherited my name from an older brother of my father, who at the age of 30 committed suicide, just 2 months before my birth. The story as I was told (I am not sure that it is the complete one) was that, despite his engineering diploma “Magna cum Laude” (the highest honor) and his exceptional brilliance, because of the Depression he could not find a job in Hungary. He moved to France (in the 1930s, Paris was the most important cultural and commercial center of Europe, if not the world, and it was the dream of most educated Hungarians to visit Paris). Uncle László could not find employment in France either, and he jumped into the Seine River and was drowned.

The only major difference I can recall between my parents was that my mother, who grew up in the city of Baja situated on the banks of the Danube River, loved to swim. My father’s family, including my poor uncle, lived far from any lake or river; hence none of the family members had learned how to swim; my father never stepped into any body of water larger than a small bathtub.

As to our family on my father’s side, my grandfather Somogyi Gyula and my grandmother Löwy Regina were closely related. My grandfather was an orphan and was raised by his uncle. My grandmother was his first cousin, as well as his stepsister. He became a civil engineer, and after he graduated from the University of Budapest, they moved around 1895 to Hajdunánás, a small city far from Budapest, where he became the chief city engineer. It was a very respectable position in a city with 18,000 citizens; he was second in rank after the mayor. His large house, which was next to City Hall, was very spacious and modern by local standards. The house was equipped with such locally rare

features as electricity, a radio, and a bathroom with an inside toilet – although the water had to be pumped daily by hand from a well to fill a water reservoir in the attic. However, drinking water was carried in daily by a servant from a public fountain about 1 mile from the house.

The “Hajdu” region bordering Transylvania was the most backward area of Hungary and dominated by highly religious Protestants (Calvinists – or Presbyterians). Hajdunánás is about 300 km from Budapest, but in my childhood, it required an entire day’s train trip to get there. I recall that my grandparents visited us in Budapest only on one occasion, and they never returned to visit their native city of Baja in Southern Hungary (near the Serbian border). The last time I visited Hajdunánás in 1954, it still had only a single paved street and few stores. Therefore, for every major purchase, one had to travel to Debrecen, the regional capital, which was a 90-minute train ride.

Besides my grandparents, no other educated Jewish people lived in Hajdunánás. However, a few hundred highly religious orthodox Jews lived there in a totally segregated ghetto. Mostly, they were very poor tradesmen, living in extremely primitive conditions. My grandparents had no connection with the local Jewish community.

My grandparents on my father’s side had six children, born within a span of 14 years, so my grandmother must have had a busy life. The oldest child, Kató néni² had lived the longest; she died in her late 90s. Until she became a widow she lived in Hajdunánás. She was very supportive and helpful to me in 1945 through the difficult period between the Soviet “liberation” and the return of my parents from the concentration camps. Peter and George met her daughter Katica and also her grandchildren while visiting Hungary. She also had a son Ferkó, with whom

2 Néni = aunt and Bácsi = uncle. In Hungarian etiquette, all respected older persons were addressed by these terms.

I was very close until he became a secret police officer during the communist era. I have not spoken to him since 1947. Kató néni's husband, Lajos bácsi, was a language teacher in the local high school. He came from a wealthy Christian banking family of German background and had grown up in Budapest. A highly cultured person, he loved the theater, opera and all the opportunities Budapest offered. As he graduated from the University of Budapest during the depression, he would have been happy to get any job, even in a provincial town. He settled in Hajdunánás permanently, soon met and married Kató néni, and spent the rest of his long life in Hajdunánás.



The Somogyi Family in Hajdunánás, 1930

Standing from left: László “Laci”, András “Bandi”, Erzsébet “Böske” and Miklós; Sitting from left: My Mother “Szuszi” and Father István “Pista” Grandmother Lövy Regina, Grandfather Somogyi Gyula, Grandson Szöcs Ferencz “Ferkó”, Szöcs Katalin “Kató”, and husband Szöcs Lajos.

He taught German, French and later Russian in the local protestant high school. It was always a puzzle to me how he could stand to live in that provincial place after having grown up in Budapest.

Miklós, the oldest brother of my father, was born in 1896. He lived in Hajdunánás all his life, working in a financial capacity in the local flourmill. During World War I (1914-18), he was drafted into the Hungarian army and had to fight on the Italian front. He was captured and held for 3 years as a POW in Italy. During the 1930s, he married Ella (a member of a prominent local Christian family. She had six brothers, all of whose first names started with the letter “E”: Endre, Elek, Ernő, Elemér, etc. I can’t remember the rest). Miklós bácsi had two sons; both were born rather late in his life. Around 1970, he was killed by his younger son Gyuri (another George Somogyi), who was then institutionalized for a mental disorder. The story I heard was, that Miklós bácsi was diabetic, his legs were paralyzed and he had been confined to a wheelchair for about 20 years. He had an argument with Gyuri, who was about 20 at that time, because Gyuri wanted to move his girlfriend into the family home. During the argument, Gyuri grabbed a pair of scissors and stabbed his father, striking his heart, and Miklós bácsi died instantly. Gyuri married this same girlfriend after he was released from the mental institution. They had a cruel punishment by having a daughter born blind who died at the age of 3. Gyuri could never hold a job, although he seemed to have been quite intelligent. He used to write to me in good English and send tapes of him singing his own compositions. In 2003, Gyuri died during surgery to remove a brain tumor.

His brother, Miklós Junior, still lives in Hungary and we occasionally exchange greeting cards, but I have not seen him since we emigrated. My cousin Miklós was a very successful professional and became quite wealthy. He married twice and had several children. During one of our visits to Budapest, we met

one of his daughters “Soma”. She is a celebrated popular singer and a host of a weekly TV show. I was curious to meet her because, even though she is only one-quarter Jewish, she chose to use the original family name, Spitzer, which was changed to the Hungarian sounding name Somogyi by her great-great-grandparents. Being proud of her Jewish heritage, her reasoning was that this was a forced name change in order to avoid Hungarian anti-Semitism. That was a bold statement in today’s Hungary. Our meeting with her was interesting because she is a vociferous and forthright person. We ate in an outdoor restaurant where many people recognized her and gathered to take her picture; obviously she is a popular person in Hungary.

The third child was László; except for his suicide, I don’t know much about him, which is strange.

The fourth child was István, my father, born in 1903 in Hajdunánás. He attended protestant schools in Hajdunánás, an agricultural center. At the age of 17 he was diagnosed with lung problems. The doctor thought that it was the result of the locally dusty environment and recommended that he move away as soon as feasible and choose an outdoor occupation. After graduating from the local “gimnázium” (high school), he moved to Budapest and returned to his native town only for brief visits. In Budapest he enrolled at the College of Horticulture. After receiving his diploma, his mentor recommended that he travel to France to improve his knowledge (at that time only the university in Versailles offered university level horticultural education) and to learn French. He spent about 3 years in France and profited greatly from this experience. He became one of the foremost horticulture authorities in Hungary, publishing numerous textbooks and establishing orchid growing in greenhouses. In 1928, he received an invitation to manage the royal gardens, a rare opportunity for a man of Jewish background.

András, “Bandi bácsi,” was the youngest brother of my father

and I am quite certain that Andris was named after him. He was my favorite uncle. He married rather late, and the marriage lasted only a brief time, ending in divorce. He was the only sibling of my father who lived in Budapest. He visited us at least once a week, and I could hardly wait to see him. I reminisced about this when I saw Rianna waiting for my nephew Andris to show up seeing a replay of my childhood. He perished in 1944 in a Nazi forced labor camp.

The youngest child was Böske néni. As her story during the Nazi era has influenced my life, I will write in more detail about her later.

One important point: My grandfather was employed as a public officer in a predominantly protestant city and was compelled, along with the entire family, to convert from Judaism to Christianity in the early 1900s. I believe it was an opportunistic move to keep his high status as a municipal employee in a small city that was overwhelmingly protestant. All the children, including my father, attended a protestant high school, the only high school in the area. Therefore, the entire family became completely assimilated into the local society. Of the six children, only my father married a Jewish woman (although my mother had also converted to Christianity before marrying my father).

Miklós bácsi and Kató néni were married to Christians, and their spouses remained loyal to them during the Nazi era. In fact, they saved their lives. Because they were married to Christian spouses and had converted to Christianity, the Nazi regime exempted them from deportation and other restrictions affecting Jews. From 1941 anti-Jewish laws prohibited marriage between Christians and Jews. However, those who had been married to Christians before 1941 and who had converted to Christianity were exempt from these laws. Despite this, Jewish men were not allowed to join the regular army and carry arms. Instead, they had to serve in Jewish work units attached to the army.

Bandi bácsi had married a Christian as well. She abandoned him in 1944 when being married to a Jew became risky. This may have been the cause of his death while serving in the army worker's unit. As his surviving comrades from the labor camp related to us, Bandi bácsi became very depressed as a result of his wife's behavior. One day, he simply refused to get up, and as a result he was shot to death. Some years later, I worked at the same company as his ex-wife but, I never talked to her.

During World War I (1914-18), my grandparents had a hard time. Besides lack of food and fuel and other limited resources, Miklós bácsi, the oldest son, was drafted into the Hungarian army. He was captured by the enemy, and spent 3 years in an Italian POW camp. During his captivity, my grandparents received no information about his fate. After his release, he suffered from various illnesses for the rest of his life. He was confined to a wheelchair by the age of 50. Ten years after Miklós bácsi returned from the war prisoner camp, my grandparents lost their son László by suicide.

My grandmother never completely recovered emotionally from these tragic experiences. She became a very difficult person, and, among other emotional problems, she suffered from severe insomnia. She got up at 3 AM every morning. Servants (who were common in middle-class households at that time) could never stand to work for her longer than a month. In addition, her youngest daughter, Böske néni, had not married (she finally did so after the war in her mid-40s and lived very happily thereafter). But, before the war, Böske néni lived at home and had a very difficult time in dealing with her mother. This, together with her inability to find a husband and her dependency on her mother, was very depressing for her. She was unable to deal with her hard life and tried to commit suicide several times. Fortunately her attempts were unsuccessful. The stories I heard indicate that she had taken poison, but vomited before it could harm her. Then, she jumped in front of a car, but the car stopped in time

and she incurred only minor injuries. Finally, she took a train to Budapest (there were no high-rise buildings near Hajdunánás), and immediately after she got off the train went to the fifth floor of the nearest apartment building and jumped out the window. However, her skirt got entangled in a flagpole about two floors below and she hung there until firemen arrived to rescue her.

After this incident, she stayed with us for several weeks in Budapest. That was difficult for my mother and us children because we lived in a 2-bedroom apartment. Finally, she enrolled in a Protestant order and became a nurse. This solved her emotional problems and also saved her life. As a member of this nursing order, her Jewish background was never revealed. She remained in Budapest during the Nazi occupation and worked in a hospital. After the liberation, she located my brother Öcsi and me and helped us a great deal. Years later, she married a Christian, Géza bácsi, who had been a Soviet POW. As she was an idealist, she became a fervent Communist. If she had lived in America, she would have become a social worker. But despite our very different political ideals, she remained very close to me and even to Marika.

During each summer of my childhood, I stayed with my grandparents for a couple of weeks. There was very little for me to do and I have very little recollection of these visits, except that every time we left for Budapest, my grandmother cried uncontrollably, making a big scene at the train platform. During the rest of the year, I wrote to them weekly. I mention this to put in perspective how fortunate we are to be able to keep in regular contact with our own grandchildren, including frequent visits and telephone conversations. I remember very clearly my last visit with my grandparents during the summer of 1943. I was a “big boy” then - 12 years old, and allowed to take the train to Hajdunánás on my own for the first time. I spent a whole month with my grandparents, possibly because I was the only guest and now more mature.

At age 73, my grandfather was still active in his retirement and took me along on field trips to places where he was designing roads so that I could help him take field measurements. He was always in a good mood and smiling. Typical of his humor is the following story: In Hajdunánás early in the morning, the shepherds came through the town collecting pigs, cows and geese to be taken out for grazing to the fields outside the town. Around 5 AM each morning the shepherds blew a loud trumpet-like instrument and sang while gathering the animals. Unfortunately, one of the shepherds made most of the loud noise right below my grandparent's bedroom window. My grandfather became tired of it, and one morning he went out with a glass of brandy. He told the shepherd that he loved the sound of his instrument so much, that if he played next to the house, he would reward him each morning with brandy. The shepherd was very happy and showed up next morning to give an especially long and loud concert. He received his payment for the next 3 days. After that, my grandfather did not show up with the brandy even after an extended concert. The shepherd became angry with this frugal treatment and decided that he was not going to provide free entertainment for my grandfather, and from then on he blew his trumpet very far from my grandparent's home.

During this last visit, I played cards every evening with my grandparents, making them happy. Grandmother seemed to be relaxed, even singing on these occasions. During this 1-month stay, I finally achieved warm and close ties. I really learned to appreciate and love them. After that visit, however, I never saw them again. One year later, the Nazis deported them and they perished. We don't know exactly when or where.



**The Somogyi Grandparents in their Garden with Bandi Bácsi
Hajdunánás, 1943--the last occasion I saw all of them**

The family on my mother's side

The background of my mother Wiesel Szeréna, (most people called her Szuszi) was quite different from that of my father. My parents were second cousins. Therefore, I had family members with the SOMOGYI family name on both sides and it was pretty confusing. My grandmother (her maiden name was Spitzer Irén – her male siblings changed their name to the more Hungarian sounding Somogyi) was married to Wiesel Illés who died suddenly from a stroke when my mother was only 13 years old, and I obviously never met him. My grandmother was born and lived her entire life in Baja, a small city in Southern Hungary located on the banks of the Danube (Duna) River.

My great-grandparents lived in Baja, where they were prominent industrialists. They owned several factories that manufactured products such as bricks, alcohol, and vinegar (maybe my food-scientist profession originated with them). Among the products they manufactured were brick tiles used for paving sidewalks. Even in the 1990s when I visited Baja, some of the bricks in the sidewalk still showed the inscription “SK,” the initials of my great-grandfather “Spitzer Karl.” In 1992, when I last visited in Baja, the factory still existed. It was run and owned by the socialist state. My great-grandparents, Spitzer Karl and Carol, had many children; I am not sure how many, but I met six siblings of my grandmother. They all lived in Baja and, with the exception of my grandmother, they were all quite well-to-do.



Portrait of My Great grandparents from 1867
Karl Spitzer born 1827 and Szeren Spitzer born Kohn in 1840

My mother had two older sisters. The oldest, Mici, was born in 1901. She looked normal at birth, but as a child she contracted a strange and untreatable deforming disease. She developed a hunch back, became increasingly disfigured and mentally remained at the level of a 10-year old. But she had a good nature. After I Overcame my repugnance over her unappealing outward appearance, I grew to like her. We played cards and she was devoted to me. Actually she loved children. She was allowed to sit in the classroom of the Jewish private elementary school for over 25 years. She even collected a monthly allowance from her wealthy relatives to buy candy to distribute to the kids. She was the only person in the extended family who attended Friday night services at the synagogue. My uncles, aunts and cousins in Baja remained Jews, but were all secular.

The second sister of my mother, Elisabeth (Csöre néni), according to the local story, was the most beautiful and popular girl in the Jewish society of Baja and had many admirers. Close to the end of World War I in 1918, the Yugoslav navy sailed up the Danube and occupied Southern Hungary. Despite the

unpopularity of the occupying Yugoslav navy personnel with the Hungarians, Csöre néni fell in love with a young naval officer, Mirko Pleiweiss. She married him and after the war she left with him for Yugoslavia. Mirko bácsi was a member of an aristocratic Slovenian Catholic family and his parents had never seen an educated middle class Jew. They knew only the local poor orthodox tradesmen. So they were in a panic when Mirko bácsi announced that he would marry a Hungarian Jewish girl. When his family finally met Csöre néni, who was an attractive, well-educated woman, they started to laugh. They had concluded that Mirko was playing a practical joke, because his bride was obviously a middle-class Christian.



Grandmother, Young Spitzer Irén
Grandmother and my Mother around 1930



My Grandfather Wiesel Illés

I met Mirko bácsi only once. I was about 3 when my mother and I visited them in Belgrade. Among my earliest memories was playing with his sword and navy hat. Their daughter Sonja visited our grandmother in Baja every summer and she learned to speak Hungarian. Her yearly visits came to an end in 1941 when Hitler occupied Yugoslavia. After the war the relationship was hostile between Hungary and Yugoslavia and travel between the two countries was not allowed. Although Yugoslavia became a communist country, its leader Marshall Tito rejected Stalin and Soviet dominance. We could reunite with Csöre néni and Sonja only in 1956 after Stalin's death, when Tito reconciled with the more liberal Soviet leaders.

A remarkable part of this story is that during World War II, Mirko bácsi became a national hero. By 1941, he had attained the rank of admiral and became one of the highest-ranking officers of the Yugoslav navy. Once the war began, one of his subordinate officers, a Croatian Nazi sympathizer, wanted to turn over the Yugoslav navy ships to the Germans. However, Mirko bácsi decided to sink the Yugoslav navy ships rather than surrender them to the Nazis. Mirko bácsi shot the mutinous officer on the spot and sank the ships. A memorial commemorating Mirko bácsi as a national hero marks the location— (at a beach along the Adriatic Sea, in the Croatian town of Selce) - where he shot the rebellious officer. Marika and I visited the memorial in 2006.

After the Germans occupied Yugoslavia, Mirko joined Tito's partisan movement and fought with him against the Nazis. At the end of the war, although Tito decorated Mirko, he also sent him into early retirement. (As an aristocrat, he was not considered a desirable addition to the officers' ranks of the communist Yugoslavian navy). He and Csöre néni settled at his birthplace in Maribor, a nice, old city located in Slovenia, one of the five former Yugoslav Republics and an independent republic since 1986. For the rest of his life, Mirko gardened and hiked in the Slovenian Alps. He and Csöre néni enjoyed a long, beautiful, marriage, in love until the end. They died within 1 year of each other. Unfortunately, their only daughter Sonja, had died earlier of cancer.

An unexpected opportunity occurred in 1992 while I was working at Stanford Research Institute. I received a project assignment in Slovenia and stayed in Maribor. Although my relatives were all dead by that time, I located their house and met Sonja's widowed husband Dusan, a retired economics professor. Using an interpreter to talk to each other, he told me that his entire family was dead. His brother was killed in WWII, fighting in a German SS unit, while Dusan was fighting on the opposite side, along with the Tito partisans. After the war, their mother was

institutionalized because she envisioned that Dusan had shot and killed his brother while fighting on opposite sides. Dusan told me that through his marriage to Sonja, my first cousin, I was his closest living relative.

In Maribor when I mentioned that I was the nephew of the late Mirko Pleiweiss, the Slovenians often hugged me because most knew his name from history books. Often these friendly Slovenians opened a bottle of wine to toast the memory of Mirko bácsi, a true war hero.



**A World War II Hero.
Monument to Uncle Mirko Pleiweiss next to the Adriatic
Sea, in Selce, Croatia.
Marika and I visited the monument in 2006.**

Born in 1906, my mother was the youngest of the three daughters in her family. When she was 13 years old, her father collapsed

suddenly at family dinner, complaining of a severe headache; he died before he could receive medical help. He was a grain wholesaler, and at the time of his death he was experiencing financial difficulty. After her father's sudden death, my mother grew up poor among well-to-do relatives and friends. Unfortunately, her childhood poverty resulted in an overly pessimistic attitude during the remainder of her life.

Prior to 1944 with my mother and brother Somogyi István (Öcsi), I vacationed every summer in Baja for a month. Also, during Easter school holiday, I traveled alone to Baja on a Danube passenger boat. I loved my visits there. Baja was a very pleasant city and my wealthy relatives spoiled me, perhaps because of their sympathy for my grandmother's financial plight; she was the only needy member of the family.

Following my grandfather's early and sudden death, her income consisted of small, monthly pensions from the factory founded by her father. The alcohol, vinegar and yeast factories were owned by her brother Somogyi Gyula (he had the same name as my grandfather on my father's side). My grandmother resided in a small apartment inside the alcohol factory. It was primitive housing, without electricity. The kitchen and bathroom were detached from the living quarters. One had to go outdoors to get to the kitchen, where wood fires were used for cooking. Below her window, the tradesmen made barrels. I can still hear the steady hammering of the barrel-makers, which continued from early morning to night, six days a week. I also remember a penetrating smell of vinegar coming from the manufacturing plant in the adjacent building.

Either as a result of goodness or sympathy, all my mother's numerous relatives spoiled me during my stays in Baja. I enjoyed daily treats at the pastry shop, seeing movies, etc.; more importantly, they took me on boating trips at their private beach club. I received swimming lessons there, passing the final test

by swimming to the opposite bank of the Danube River. These experiences initiated my love for water activities, which remain with me even today.

I remember my vacations in Baja as the happiest times of my childhood. My grandmother was a lovely person, who also spoiled me within her limited means. Baja was the only place where I was exposed to my Jewish background, although it was never openly mentioned. I think my parents asked my relatives to keep me uninformed as much as possible. I was wise enough to figure out that I had a Jewish background, but also realized that back in Budapest I should not mention this to my friends. When I returned home from Baja, I simply blocked out of my mind the “Jewish” relations in Baja. In my circles of acquaintances it would have been a “shameful” heritage.

Of all my beloved relatives in Baja, only a very few survived the Nazi era. The last time I visited Baja, I went to the local Holocaust memorial in the garden of the now abandoned Synagogue. On the marble memorial panel, I counted 36 familiar names of uncles, aunts and even baby cousins who perished in concentration camps. The Jewish elementary school, where Mici spent her days had about 60 students before the German occupation, only one of whom survived the Nazi era. During this visit in 1992, I still recognized the peeling green paint on my grandmother’s front gate, just as it had been during my last stay there in 1943.

When I happily pushed Rianna in her stroller for the first time during a walk in California, I could not help remembering a visit to Baja when I was about 12 years old. Then, an uncle entrusted me with taking his infant daughter (whose name happened to be Somogyi Marika) around the block in her stroller. This was the first time I was given such an important task and I was very excited. One year later Marika, her younger sister and their mother were all shot to death by the German SS. They were in hiding and some local Hungarians reported them to the Germans. This

is just an illustration of how even lovely memories of Hungary are mixed with such depressing facts, and this is why I normally walk away during social occasions when people talk about their wonderful tourist experiences in Hungary.

This family background may seem too long to some, but I believe it is necessary to fully appreciate the rest of the story.



My little cousins Somogyi Marika and Zsuzsi at the beach club, Baja, 1943

One year later they were shot to death by the German SS after someone revealed they were Jews in hiding.

My Parents

Getting closer to my immediate story, my mother and father met while visiting relatives in the garden district of Buda. They were second cousins and both were relatives of the host. The house where they met still existed in 1994. We stayed with my son Peter and his wife Cyndi in a nearby Bed and Breakfast and I pointed out the house. Later, I became very familiar with the place because we often visited these relatives during my childhood. My parents fell in love at first sight. Soon after this meeting, my father left for France to study, but they kept in touch. I believe the main reason for my father's return to Hungary was to marry my mother.

After returning from France, in order to live close to my mother, my father accepted a teaching job in Baja where they were married in 1928. Soon after their wedding, my father was invited to work at the Royal Gardens and those, they moved to Budapest. My mother had some difficulty in adjusting to the new surroundings. Imagine a young woman moving from a provincial city to the Royal Palace in the Capital City, where a royal guard would escort every invited guest to their apartment inside the palace. By the time I was born in 1931, they had moved to a satellite building which was still part of the palace complex, which allowed them to move freely but, of course with less security. But, my mother's absolute devotion to my father helped overcome these problems. I found a Hungarian book describing the parts of the Royal Gardens he was responsible for, including an architectural drawing of the house we lived in. The house was designed by a famous architect, Ybl Miklós, who had also designed the Budapest Opera House.

As a kid I often admired my parent's lovely wedding photo below:



Wedding Photo of my Parents, Baja, 1928

A crisis happened early in my parents' marriage. All the "smart" relatives had opposed their marriage on the grounds that they were second cousins. In 1929, my mother delivered a stillborn girl—supposedly justifying the predictions of the "smart" family members. I was born after the third year of their marriage, and as most people agreed, I am somewhat normal. At that point, my parents' marriage became more acceptable to the family. In 1934, three and a half years later, my brother Öcsi was born. That event must have been a great shock for me, because I have a clear memory of visiting my mother in the hospital and taking a first look at my baby brother. Also, I clearly remember his christening in the protestant church. According to my aunt's account, I worried all the time during the ceremony, whispering to her, "are we returning home in a taxicab the same way we came to the church?"

Brief Historical Background of Hungary between WWI and WWII

First it may be helpful for the reader to recollect briefly the major historical events to which I will refer in my personal story.

Between WWI and WWII, Hungary was governed in a semi-authoritarian manner by Horthy Miklós, a conservative nationalistic leader. Hungary was allied with Nazi Germany during World War II, but the persecution of its sizable Jewish population (well over half a million) did not begin until German troops occupied the country in March 1944. Then, even though Horthy remained Head of State, politics veered to the far right.

During the summer of 1944, Jews from the countryside were deported to the German death camps. Jews in Budapest, however, were moved to apartment buildings marked with a yellow star, but not yet driven into a ghetto. In October 1944, Horthy attempted to take Hungary out of the Nazi alliance and declared an armistice with the Allies. The attempt was foiled by the German troops and their Hungarian supporters, the pro-Nazi Arrow Cross Party (the Hungarian Nazis); Horthy himself was arrested and the army troops supporting him were quickly defeated. After the Arrow Cross Party came into power, persecution of the remaining Jews in Budapest began in earnest, first with a series of pogroms and then by the formation of a ghetto.

Meanwhile, Soviet troops were steadily advancing from the East, and by early in December they were on the outskirts of Budapest. By then most of the Jews of Budapest were in the ghetto; a few thousand were in special protected houses set up by Raoul Wallenberg in the name of Sweden and by other neutral countries; the remainder of the Jews were in hiding. The Soviet troops had liberated the Pest side by mid-January and Buda by the end of February.

My Personal Story Begins

Even after breaking the “blank-paper syndrome,” I suspended the writing of my story for another 10 years. Unfortunately, since the September 11, 2001 attacks, life in the U.S. has changed for the worse. It has not only involved Muslim extremists and their threats, but it also triggered the unfortunate U.S. reaction leading to the worst recession in U.S. history. In spite of the economic crisis, Marika and I are still living a very comfortable life, but the future of the United States concerns me greatly. (I have inserted this comment to illustrate my state of mind when I began to write this portion of my personal history.)



Six weeks old Lackó with parents, 1931

Born in 1931 in Budapest, I spent the first 13 years of my life in the mistaken belief that I was part of Hungarian middle class society. In fact, I had a privileged place in society because my father worked as manager of the Royal Gardens. We lived on the grounds of the Royal Palace, surrounded and at least superficially

accepted by the Hungarian “elite”. Our Jewish background was never discussed, although I observed it when visiting my grandmother on my mother’s side. Since being Jewish was shameful, I never brought up my Jewish background with anyone within our social circle.

I attended the nearby public school, where the majority of students were sons (schools in Budapest were not coeducational) of military officers. In the Hungarian system, after 4th grade, we attended the “gimnázium” from 5th to 12th grades. Gimnázium is the Hungarian version of college preparatory high school. Those who did not qualify for the gimnázium attended a four-year trade school. (A funny episode: soon after I arrived in America, I did not know the term “high school”. In a job interview, I said that I attended a “gimnázium” for eight years. The interviewer responded: “Were you preparing for the Olympic games?”).

By the time I applied for entrance to the gimnázium in 1941, the Hungarian Parliament had enacted the infamous Jewish restrictive laws, limiting the number of Jewish students who could be accepted. Although I was Christian from birth, my grandparents were Jewish, and thus the restrictive laws applied to us as well. Because of these laws, it would have been a problem for me to be accepted in the gimnázium. But my father’s boss, the Chief of Staff of Horthy Miklós, the Head of State, called the school superintendent and I was admitted to the gimnázium even though the “Jewish quota” had been filled. I was not told about this background maneuver until much later. Instead, at the time it felt natural that, as a member of the privileged Hungarian middle class, all doors were open to me.

In a way, I was a bit of an outsider. In school, military customs prevailed. Physical achievements were more important than academic progress, and I was never good at physical activities. At all times we had to wear soldiers’ hats that displayed the school emblem and class identity. When we passed a teacher on the

street, we had to greet him with military salute. Also, every morning before classes, we had to line up in the school backyard in military formation. One of the students had to declare to the head teacher in military style, the number who were present and absent.

I had been baptized a Presbyterian and in public schools, religious education was mandatory. On Sunday morning, we met at school in military formation and we carried the school flag as we marched to church. We attended classes six days a week (including Saturday). But we did not complain about this busy schedule. Our parents, and even our grandparents, had grown up under the same system.

Despite the rigorous schedule during the school year, we did have a generous summer vacation of about three months. Each summer until 1944, we vacationed for one month in Gödöllő, near Budapest. The official vacation place for the Hungarian Heads of State (the Kings before WWI), it consisted of a castle surrounded by a large park that was under the supervision of my father. We could roam in the park, enjoy the swimming pool, ride bicycles etc. My playmates were mostly the children of the Royal Guard officers. My family background was never discussed, and my friends believed that I came from a Hungarian, Christian middle-class family. The father of one of my closest friends was General Lázár Miklós, who was chief officer of the Hungarian royal guard (Testőrség). In 1944 he played a leading role trying to resist the advancing German army, which was, alas, a futile effort. I shall tell this story later.

The two girls whose hands I am holding in the photo below were daughters of Mr. Keresztes an officer of the Royal Guards. In 1944 he was one of the officers who carried the Hungarian Crown out of Budapest to save it from the advancing Soviet army. Keresztes and the crown were captured by the American forces in Germany. When the Crown was seized he committed

suicide shooting himself with his revolver. The crown was held for over 30 years in Fort Knox Texas. President Carter returned it for the Hungarians. The crown was given to St. Steven by the Pope in 1001 and presently exhibited in the Hungarian National Museum.



The Castle in Gödöllő, 1941-

I am in the middle and Öcsi is on the left

The family vacationed here for several weeks each summer.

The castle was surrounded by a large park, which was under my father's supervision. It was damaged during the war, and restored only recently. I visited it in 2007 and after the restoration everything looked the same as when my father left it in 1944



Gödöllő, 1942. I am on the right side, with my Mother and Öcsi.

We are sitting in front of the greenhouse, which was destroyed during the war and rebuilt recently according to its original design

After spending a month in Gödöllő, we visited our grandparents. My mother's mother lived in Baja, and we could go there by boat on the Danube. I loved my visits there because, as I indicated, we had a large family, most of whom were very well-to-do and who spoiled me. Baja was also a pleasant little city; in the summer, most relatives convened at the club next to the River each afternoon for boating, swimming and of course eating. In the early evenings, one of the relatives usually invited me to join him or her for the evening at the movies, which was preceded by a treat of ice cream and cakes at the pastry shop. After these festive stays in Baja, I visited my father's parents who lived in Hajdunánás. I had two cousins in Hajdunánás, with whom I played

games; that was about the only fun I had there.

From the age of seven, I was a Boy Scout. In this organization, Jewish boys were separated into special units. (Even those who had converted to Christianity, but whose grandparents were Jewish, was subject to Nazi laws). Legally I was Jewish, but I remained a member of the regular Christian troop. I was Protestant and no one ever asked about my grandparents' religion. Thinking back, I was quite stupid to be part of the Boy Scouts. It was a militaristic organization promoting pro-German ideas and emphasizing physical achievement, which was never my strong side; as a result, I often considered myself a failure. But in summer of 1943, I went to a Boy Scout camp and became very close to one of my long-term friends, Báthory Zoli. He came from a historically famous family (Polish Kings etc. were among his ancestors). He told me years later that when we met on the street in 1944 and he saw me wearing the yellow star, his attitude changed and he no longer believed the Nazi propaganda about Jews. In the fall of 1944 when I was hiding during the German occupation, I did not hesitate to call him and reveal my whereabouts—despite his uncle's being the Hungarian Nazi propaganda minister (he was hanged after the war as a leading war criminal). Zoli would come to visit me in hiding and it never occurred to me that he might report me to the Nazi police.

This accounts for my history up to March 19, 1944 when suddenly everything changed in my life.

***Beginning of the Hungarian Holocaust:
March 19, 1944***

I was 13 years old on March 17, 1944 and suffering a high fever from measles. Thanks to the availability of good vaccinations, children today do not suffer from most of the highly contagious diseases that we as children frequently contracted. In those days, these diseases involved long quarantines, with apartment front doors tagged with red warning signs. That evening, my father came home from work looking very depressed. He did not mention any reason for his worries; in fact, he hardly spoke. The next morning, we learned from the radio that the German army had occupied Hungary. Our house led to the Royal Palace and my father had witnessed the Hungarian Royal Guard ready to defend the castle and possibly fight Germans in front of our residence. Later, they received orders to surrender to the Germans without a fight. My father witnessed the Hungarian Guards being disarmed by the advancing German SS and taken away as prisoners.

The Hungarian government had tried for years to avoid German occupation and maintain national independence by supporting the German war efforts. Since 1942, the Hungarian government had sacrificed some army units by sending them to fight the Soviet Army along with the Germans. Those army units were unprepared to survive the Russian winter: their equipment did not work in the severe cold. As a result, they became immobilized, froze to death, or were captured by the Soviet army, only to perish in Siberian camps. Unfortunately, several Hungarian Jewish work units were sent as well to the Russian front to support the regular army and suffered even more. Only about 10% of the Jewish work units survived the severe winter of 1942/43 at the Russian front.

However, at the same time in Budapest, life was almost normal.

Some food and fuel shortages existed and rationing was imposed, but that did not affect our immediate family. As long as my father worked in the Royal Gardens, we received special rations of sugar, meat etc. in such abundance that we were able to share them with relatives, friends, our physician etc. I even benefited from this situation by delivering these goods to relatives, who were of course delighted with my service and rewarded me with generous “tips”. Our firewood was delivered every morning by a worker from the garden who arranged them next to the fireplace.

Two laws introduced in the Hungarian Parliament in 1939 and 1942 restricted Jews from practicing trade, art, law and other professions, and from enrolling in universities. But these laws were often circumvented or the authorities were often bribed. As a result of these laws Marika’s father lost his job, but managed to start a small business using the cover of a Christian business associate. The individuals who agreed to these cover-ups for Jewish-owned enterprises were called “straw-men”.

By 1943, the Nazi war effort was failing, especially on the Soviet front. Around 1943-44 the Hungarian government was secretly negotiating with the Allies to arrange a cease-fire. Hitler found out and sent an ultimatum to the Hungarian government to increase its war effort against the Soviets. Head of State Horthy was asked to a meeting with Hitler in Germany and while he was there the German troops occupied Hungary. Resistance was minimal and within 24 hours the German army had complete control over Hungary. Immediately, the government resigned, Premier Kállay Miklós was arrested within a few hours, and a new pro-Nazi government took over.

The occupying Germans and the new Hungarian government proceeded immediately with its Jewish extermination plans. By this time, the Germans had occupied many countries and had therefore gained experience in the cruel methods they used to

control them. Leading Jews, left-leaning Hungarian political leaders and journalists were arrested within a few hours of the occupation. The Germans had precise lists of these people, which were provided by members of the Hungarian Nazi Party. Soon new laws were promulgated that restricted the travel of Jews. Starting on April 5, 1944, all Jews had to wear the yellow “Star of David”. Having no previous connection with Jewish people of my age and not having to adhere to the restrictive Jewish laws, I probably suffered more than the other Jews who had been subjected earlier to these laws. It came to us so suddenly that we were completely unprepared intellectually and emotionally. Öcsi was only 9 years old. On the first occasion, he had to wear the yellow star he asked my mother: “Why do we have to do this? Who is Jewish in our family?”

From that day my father could no longer work in the Royal Palace compounds. He received only the small pension he was entitled to after 18 years of working for the State. On his last working day, on April 4, Head of State Horthy invited my father for an audience to say farewell to him. Horthy shook hands with my father and expressed his regret that he was forced to retire. This was remarkable behavior, because officially, Horthy was a collaborator with Hitler. Basically, however, he was a decent person. He loved plants and frequently visited the greenhouses and he often talked with my father. Also, Horthy said that one day after the war my father would return to his job. My father was able to return to see the sad ruins of the palace, but Horthy was never allowed to return to Hungary after the end of war. More stories will follow about his role during the summer and fall of 1944 and his post-war fate.

For a while, we felt ashamed to appear on the streets wearing the Yellow Star because most of our acquaintances had not known that we were Jews. For a couple of weeks, we did not leave our apartment because of self-imposed house arrest. One man, formerly a subordinate of my father, even volunteered to do our

food shopping. I was lucky to be ill at the time because I did not have to go back to school. School activities were soon suspended anyway because of the serious crisis. However, I did receive my report showing that I had completed 7th grade.

From mid-April, the Allies started devastating air raids of Budapest and we had to go to the air-raid shelter wearing our Jewish stars. I must say that people in the shelter, mostly former associates of my father and usually German sympathizers, behaved very nicely. I think this was because they felt high respect for my father. Some pretended that they did not notice our yellow stars. Others expressed regret that we had to go through such discrimination. Typically, they supported restrictions for the Jews in general but regarded us as “good Jews”. Although most people had a “favorite Jew”, the majority supported the restrictions against Jews.

I was delighted that the air raids by the American and British air forces had begun. It meant that the Allied forces were getting closer and had not forgotten us (we assumed that anyway). In 1944, aviation was much less sophisticated than it is today. Jets had not yet been developed, and the relatively small propeller planes loaded with heavy bombs had only a limited range. By the spring of 1944, the Allies had secured the Italian island of Sicily. They landed there in July 1943 and built airfields close enough to fly over Hungary. The airplanes flew in large groups, and met over Lake Balaton. Then, the leading planes drew a smoke-circle over the target area and all the other planes flew inside the smoke circle to unload their bombs. The timing of the first raids coincided with the first day Jews had to wear the Yellow Star. These raids became an issue for the Nazi propaganda machine, which proclaimed that the reason for the air raid was a revenge for the treatment of the Jews. This compounded the hatred of Jews by many Hungarians.

By the end of April we had given up our self-imprisonment. To

supplement his small pension, my father started to work in a private nursery. The owner knew him and respected him. Small establishments were still allowed to employ Jews as manual laborers. My father never complained. Imagine this degrading turn in his status. One day he managed over 60 people, was in charge of maintaining a beautiful park surrounding the Royal Palace and a greenhouse-complex full of exotic plants. Then suddenly, he was working as a manual laborer in a small nursery. But he was an optimist, hoping that the situation would not deteriorate further. But it did, of course, and very fast.

From March to July 1944, the Hungarian Nazi authorities introduced new restrictions almost daily. Some of them were trivial, whereas others severely affected our daily life. Just to list a few, first we could ride only at the back of streetcars. Soon we were prohibited from traveling on any public transportation and from attending movies, theatres or concerts. Jewish doctors were allowed to treat only Jewish patients. Our food rations were reduced to about half those that Christians received. We could not enter public parks, use swimming pools etc. Our radios were confiscated so that we could not hear the Allied news broadcasts. What was painful to me was that after many years of wanting a bicycle, I received one for Christmas. But I could not ride it during the winter. An order was issued that all Jews had to turn in their bicycles to the Army so I had to give up the new bicycle without ever having used it. Moreover, the order required that the bicycle had to be equipped with a dynamo-powered light. I did not have one, so we had to purchase a new light before the bike was confiscated.

The law also required that all boys over the age of 13 must attend weekly military training. Before the German occupation, I was training in the Christian unit. Now, Jewish boys had to participate in a separate unit doing public works rather than receiving military training. Doing this service we were required to wear a yellow arm-band (or a white armband for those who had

converted to Christianity, but were still legally Jews). Forgetting this obligation was punishable by jail. After the German occupation I had to report to the Jewish "*Levente*" unit. This activity was organized within our school and I had to show up wearing the yellow star. Other Jewish boys from the school (their number was limited to 5% of the class) had never even suspected that I was Jewish according to the Nazi laws. They received me with warm and friendly gestures. This was the first time I became closely associated with Jewish students, and the experience was very rewarding. When I arrived at the school ground, the janitor noticed that I was wearing the yellow star. He hugged me and started to cry. Maybe he felt sympathy because he foresaw what would happen to us in the near future. Unfortunately, the leader responsible for the unit was a physical education teacher in our high school. He was different; he made derogatory remarks and demanded the most strenuous physical work possible. After the war, he was jailed for a few years for his excessive behavior and he was never allowed to resume his teaching job.

Our degraded, but relatively peaceful existence was only temporary, ending within a few weeks. In May all Jews in the countryside were relocated in a fenced-in ghetto. Police patrolled the ghetto continually to prevent escapes. Food supplies were at starvation level and people had to live in very crowded rooms resulting in a loss of dignity. This arrangement was obviously in preparation for deportation, but we tried to believe that it was not forthcoming. In Budapest, the creation of a ghetto was delayed because the logistics for constructing an isolated Jewish district were too difficult even for the efficient and experienced German Gestapo.

My grandparents had to abandon their homes, move to the Ghetto and live in very congested and unpleasant quarters. My paternal grandparents moved to a primitive house without basic sanitary facilities that was owned by poor tradesmen. My grandmother in Baja had a somewhat better situation because the local Jewish quarter was occupied by middle-class Jews.



The Somogyi Family, 1944

The last photo before the beginning of the Holocaust in Hungary

At the beginning of June the first major blow hit our immediate family. My father had to join the Jewish labor unit of the Hungarian Army. He had to report within 24 hours after receiving the order and could carry with him only those few items that fit into his backpack. He departed at the beginning of June 1944. A very cruel and uncertain future was ahead of him. He was sent to Western Hungary to a town called Komárom and assigned to build a bridge over the Danube. In addition to his having to do very hard physical work at the age of 41, the supervising military commanders were very cruel. Physical harassment including beatings occurred frequently, and food was at a minimum. Members of his Jewish work unit consisted mainly of intellectuals, journalists, musicians, university professors, etc., none of whom was used to physical labor. The supervising military confiscated all valuables. My father worked there until February 1945. By that time, the Soviet army had advanced and his unit was forced to march on foot to a German concentration camp. I

describe his fate in Germany later.

After my father's departure, my mother who was always dependent on him became totally helpless. At the same time, moving and other important decisions were waiting for us. We had no communication with my father, except for infrequent postcards read by military censors. In the absence of my father and the complete emotional collapse of my mother, at the age of 13 I became *de facto* head of the family. I made all important decisions, dealt with the authorities, and organized the relocation from our home to the places intended for Jewish residence.

In early June I witnessed for the first time real tragedy. In Budapest, as in most European cities, doctors had large apartments adjacent to their offices where they treated patients. Usually in the morning, doctors made house calls and visited hospitalized patients; in the afternoon, people came to their home offices without appointments to see the doctors for treatment. My mother's cousin, Márta néni was married to Jenő bácsi who was a dermatologist (they will be mentioned frequently later). One of the restrictions introduced in June 1944 was that Jews were not allowed to hire any household helpers. Therefore Jenő bácsi had to fire his long-time maid who used to greet his patients. My aunt still felt it was below her dignity to greet her husband's patients. Of course, the doctor could not interrupt the examinations of his patients to open the door. Jenő bácsi asked me if I would take this job and in return, receive a generous wage. My responsibility was to be there between 2 and 5 PM, greet patients and show them to the waiting room. Between these tasks I could read a book from my uncle's very large library. The only problem I faced was that the office was located about four miles from our home and Jews were forbidden to use public transportation. Therefore I had to walk the whole distance, but I enjoyed having my first job.

During these duties, I remember a memorable meeting. A very

kind gentleman came almost daily. I did not know him at that time, but when he discovered my identity he told me that he knew and loved my mother. In their childhood, they had spent a lot of time together. This man was Boldizsár Iván who a few months later saved Öcsi's and my lives. Often, he wore a military uniform. Later I learned that he had been in the military fighting in the Ukraine and had survived the great retreat of the army during the severe winter of 1942. After barely surviving, he deserted from the army. To avoid arrest, he stayed at a different home every single night and used false papers.

One afternoon I arrived to do my greeting job. Several times I rang the doorbell, but nobody answered. I kept ringing, knowing that it was the visiting hour and that somebody must be inside the apartment. Finally, my aunt opened the door crying hysterically. Eventually she told me that during the previous night, all Jews living in the Baja Ghetto had been herded to the railroad station, put into freight wagons and transported to an unknown destiny. These people included my grandmother, my mother's sister, and numerous aunts, cousins and other relatives. My grandmother had seven siblings, most of who lived in Baja. This information came from Márta néni's brother who lived in Baja. Because he was married to a Christian and had converted early on to Christianity, he was exempt from the Jewish laws. Their father, Gyula bácsi was the brother of my grandmother and he was blind. He and his wife were allowed to stay in a small auxiliary unit within the Ghetto. He was very rich, having inherited the alcohol factory of my great-grandfather. I assume he bribed the authorities to be able to stay in a relatively privileged housing unit. Somehow the police had missed them in the middle of the night as they herded everybody from the Ghetto to the railroad station. They woke up in the morning and realized that everybody else had been taken away. After learning this, Gyula bácsi and his wife committed suicide by poison. They are my only close relatives from Baja buried in the hometown. Most of the other Jews from there perished in concentration camps, though a few managed to

hide and survive like one of the sisters of my grandmother.

Continuing the story of that terrible day, as I was walking home, I pondered how I could break this terrible news to my mother. When I arrived home earlier than usual, my mother looked at me and realized immediately that something must be wrong. She asked me nervously what the news was. I first said that Gyula bácsi and Margit néni had committed suicide the night before. My mother was then anxious to know what had happened to her mother. I had to tell her that her mother, along with all Jews from Baja, had been deported during the night. At that time we did not know about the existence of concentration camps and gas chambers. Newspapers and radio did not mention anything about deportations and rumors circulated that Jews were taken to Germany to do forced labor (proving that optimists in that era were always wrong). My mother was desperate and for several months we continued to hope for news from her mother, which of course never came.

We heard from survivors that the Hungarian police made the deportation trip as cruel as possible. In the middle of a very hot summer they traveled for about a week to Auschwitz without food or water, while they were sitting on the floor of overcrowded cattle wagons. We believe that my grandmother and her sister-in-law (both of them in their mid-70s) did not survive this transport. They carried poison and may have committed suicide. Mici, my mother's crippled sister, was seen by surviving relatives in Auschwitz. We assume that she was killed in the gas chamber.

A few days later we learned that my grandparents on my father's side had met the same fate. Hajdunánás had only a few Jewish families—not enough to fill a transport. Therefore, Jews from several small towns of that district were first collected in the regional capital city of Debrecen. From there they were shipped in cattle wagons to Auschwitz. We know very little about my

grandparents' fate. Survivors described the cruel treatment they had to endure at the hands of the Hungarian police before they were turned over to the Germans. After the war several survivors from Hajdunánás who knew my grandparents told us that they had seen them in Austria shortly before liberation. My grandfather was a civil engineer and we postulate that his skills were useful for the Germans, who may have spared him from immediate death in the gas chamber. Hearing these stories we hoped that they had survived and would return, but they did not and we never found out how and where they died. As the weeks passed we eventually realized that they had not survived.

The Hungarian newspapers and radio never mentioned deportations, possibly because they were afraid some Hungarians might object. Jews were herded to the rail-station by the police only at night, with just the railroad personnel witness to the deportation process; the police usually brutally beat people and confiscated any valuables they carried. The German SS soldiers were in charge and they had learned their trade earlier in other occupied European countries. Within a few weeks, 600,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported. Only the Jewish population of Budapest escaped deportation—at least for the time being. Most Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz. Children and old people not suitable for hard labor were killed immediately on arrival in gas chambers at a rate of 12,000 per day. The tragic, even criminal, aspect of these events is that the Allied leaders Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin had been informed about these mass killings in the gas chambers and did not try to prevent, or at least delay, these horrors. At that time Allied airplanes had the capacity to destroy the rail system between Hungary and Auschwitz and delay the transports but these leaders did not spare a single bomb to disrupt deportation. Also, in the winter of 1945 the Soviet army deliberately stalled for weeks within sight of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Such delay probably resulted in thousands of murders that otherwise could have been prevented.

At the same time that these deportations took place, D-day, June 6 occurred. The Allied forces successfully landed on the beaches of Normandy. We learned this great, exciting news and, given our desperate situation, became excessively optimistic. We expected that the Allies would rapidly proceed and that perhaps the Germans, realizing that they had lost the war, would surrender. Thus the war would end in weeks. Unfortunately, it took 11 more months to defeat the Germans and this period was the most difficult for us. Most Hungarian Jews were killed between the invasion in June 1944 and the surrender of Germany on May 5, 1945.

After Jews had been deported from the rest of Hungary, the authorities proceeded with the logistics of eradicating the Jewish population of Budapest. It required some time, because a large and mostly assimilated Jewish population lived all over the city. Except for the Orthodox Jewish minority that lived voluntarily in a so-called “ghetto” district, it was impossible to move the entire Jewish population to one location, unlike Warsaw. Doing so would have disrupted the lives of many Christians as well. Early in July, the authorities decided to select apartment buildings as “Jewish houses” and order the Jewish population to move there. But Christian occupants were allowed to remain. The entrance gates of these apartment buildings were marked with a large yellow star and the remaining Christians occupants were ordered to put a sign on their door indicating that they were Christians. Jewish residents in these selected buildings had to share their living quarters with those families—like us—who had to move in from non-Jewish houses. This was accomplished by allowing friends to move in together after the authorities issued a permit. Those Jewish families who did not have friends or relatives in a Jewish house were forced into joining a family. Enforcement was strict regarding the number of persons who had to share one room. Most Jewish homes became extremely crowded and unpleasant as bathrooms and kitchens had to be shared by several families. Also, Jews were allowed to go outside only for about

three hours per day, and had to spend the rest of their time in overcrowded rooms.

A list of the selected Jewish houses was published and the authorities allowed five days to comply with relocation. As my mother was in a very bad emotional state, I started to negotiate. I learned that a large property of a cousin of my mother was on the list of selected homes. It was located on the beautiful hill-sides of Budapest. The property included a large peach orchard and several smaller housing units as well. In fact, this was the same place where my parents had met in a party about 20 years earlier. I was very familiar with the place because we frequently visited these relatives on Sunday afternoons. I had a second cousin there Gyuri (another George Somogyi). He was older and a rather wild kid whom I admired. Unfortunately, he was killed a few months later by the Hungarian Nazis.

Immediately I went to visit these relatives (they had no telephone), telling them that we would like to move there. For years, my mother's cousin had been in a Jewish forced labor unit until he was captured by the Soviet army. His wife was rather frugal. She agreed that we could join them, but decided to take advantage of the situation by charging us a rather high rent. We could hardly afford it, but we had no other choice and thus accepted it. Returning home, I contacted my father's former boss asking for the use of a horse carriage from the Royal Gardens to move some furniture and other belongings. We were still naïve, expected some normalcy and continuation of our earlier life. He agreed to lend the wagon, horses and coachman for the day. The next day, we loaded our belongings onto the horse wagon; with the help of my father's former workers. As we departed some of them were crying, kissing the hand of my mother and hugging me. I was riding on the horse wagon, it was a slow and difficult journey, because the horses had to climb up a steep hill to "Gugger hegy" and the load was too heavy. But we finally made it. We settled into our new home and I was happy because I could share the attic with my cousin.

Well, we soon discovered that we had moved too early. Two days later, the authorities decided that Jews could not live on the nice hillside of Buda and removed this property from the list of Jewish houses. I then found out that the house of another cousin of my mother's, Márta néni, was included on the selected list; it was the same one in which I worked earlier as the door greeter of my doctor uncle. Immediately, I called Márta néni (Jenő bácsi, her doctor husband, was still allowed to have a telephone). She accepted us gladly without requesting any rent. But she warned me that her husband's relatives were moving in as well, so we would be somewhat crowded in their home. Then, I returned to the Royal Gardens and requested the service of the horse-wagon one more time. This time, I was told that it was scheduled for another task, but I saw the manager from another unit of the Palace, and he agreed to lend us another horse-wagon. Next day, we completed the new relocation, from the hillside of Buda to the middle of Pest. After the war, this apartment was divided into two smaller units. I lived there from 1946 to 1951, and my parents remained there until their death. I tell this story later.

We settled in the large apartment in Teréz-körút 34, which was occupied by only eight people (including us) so our living conditions were better than most Jews. Besides Márta néni and Jenő bácsi, the other occupants were relatives of Jenő bácsi (including a young niece Maja – who will have an important role later in our saga). Even though we had not known the other people, we became soon attached to each other. We had to share one kitchen and one bathroom, and we soon agreed to prepare and eat lunch and dinner together. We all sat down at a large dinner table and conducted lively discussions to keep some normalcy in our new life. Jenő bácsi was a well educated man and a great storyteller. He had no children. My father was absent, so we developed a mutually loving relationship. As noted, we were allowed to go to the street only for three hours daily, which was mainly spent shopping for food. Because all Jews had to go out during the same brief time, all shops were very crowded and service was

slow (at that time, no self-service grocery stores existed). TV had not been introduced and we had no access to radio, although some people managed to listen secretly to the BBC and spread the news. Doing so was important for morale because the newspapers published only Nazi propaganda. We spent our time reading books and playing card games.

At this time an interesting change was that in the Jewish house I acquired new friends—Jewish boys and girls of my age group. This was new to me because previously I had no Jewish friends. A few Christian children remained in the building and some of them became very close friends as well. We played games, listened to records (78-rpm records that played for 3 to 4 minutes, with steel needles that had to be changed after playing three records), and acted in our self-produced plays. Thus, occasionally we almost forgot what was happening around us—doing so was our only self-defense. A younger friend, Makai Péter, directed our plays. He already showed great talent as a director. Not surprisingly, he became a successful director of the Hungarian Opera Company and even produced an opera at the *Teatro alla Scala* in Milan.

Now Jews from the suburbs of Budapest were starting to be deported. I was extremely lucky as I found out recently from a book, Kertész Imre's *Sorstalanság* (Faithlessness), a novel whose author received the Nobel Prize in literature. The author describes a story of survival in concentration camps. He was arrested and deported at the age of 14. I could have met the same fate if I had abided by the regulations. Briefly, all Jewish boys older than 13 had to report for mandatory work in a factory producing military equipment. The factory was located at the Island of Csepel outside the city limits of Budapest. The boys had received papers from the authorities allowing them to use public buses to report for work. One morning as the boys were heading to work, the police stopped the bus once it was outside Budapest. All the Jewish boys were ordered to get off, and they

were deported to Auschwitz. They could not even phone or send a letter to their parents; they simply just disappeared. Kertész survived through a series of miracles, but most of the other boys perished. I simply ignored the order and did not report for work, assuming that the police were busy with more important tasks than dealing with my absence. Thus, because I broke the law, I avoided this potential disaster. Ironically, part of my luck was that my honorable father was absent at that time. He would not have allowed me to ignore the law and would have insisted I attend the daily forced labor.

During July and the beginning of August, we expected deportation orders at any minute. We had our backpacks with essential supplies ready to go. Although we were concerned about such a future, we did not know about the gas chambers and probably would have doubted their existence. We believed that people taken to work camps had a chance of surviving and returning home after Germany was defeated. Consequently, we were disappointed at the slow progress of the Allies. We had expected that after D-day, the German army would collapse within weeks. Even in Hungarian Nazi newspapers, we read of the liberation of Paris in mid-August, substantiating our hope that the end of war was near. At the same time, the Soviet army progressed rapidly into Hungary from the east. Neighboring Romania, formerly a German ally had already declared a cease-fire with the Soviet Union, opening easy access into Hungary for the Soviet army.

We did not know it at the time but the following story appeared in *Life* magazine after the war. The delay in deporting Jews from Budapest purportedly resulted from a clever plot by a Hungarian Jew. He told the German ambassador that the Americans were interested in an exchange of Hungarian Jews for trucks the Nazis desperately needed. He proposed a negotiation with American representatives in neutral Switzerland. The Germans were interested. Roosevelt knew that he would not supply any military equipment to the Germans, but agreed to the negotiations. While

the negotiations took place between the Germans and Americans, deportation from Budapest was suspended. Every day of delay increased chances of survival. After about one month, the negotiations broke down. (We learned these facts after the war—in 1944 many rumors circulated—most of them false. We may have heard this story but assumed that it was just another optimistic rumor).

Simultaneously, another beneficial twist occurred that further delayed the resumption of deportation. In the middle of August we witnessed the arrival of Hungarian army tanks in Budapest. On the same morning, newspapers announced the replacement of the Nazi Hungarian Government with a centrist group headed by a prime minister, an army general loyal to Horthy. Notably, the two undersecretaries most notorious for organizing the deportation were left out of the new cabinet. These two Nazi officials had ordered extremely brutal treatment of the Jews during the deportation process. Treatment of the deportees had been so severe that even German SS officers in Auschwitz had complained. Hungarian Jews arrived at the camp in such miserable condition that they were unable to be assigned to work in factories essential for the war efforts. For the time being, deportation from Budapest ceased. This relief came too late for the 600,000 Jews already deported from the countryside, most of whom were dead already. But the remaining 60,000 Jews in Budapest were saved for a while.

We heard several versions after the war of what happened during that period. One theory was that two Slovak Jewish prisoners escaped from Auschwitz and contacted British newspapers. Suddenly, the story of mass murders in the gas chambers at Auschwitz became public knowledge through BBC news. Up to this point, the Allied leaders who were aware of this horror story had kept this a secret. According to one story, Horthy learned the fate of Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz and, persuaded by his liberal son, decided to stop further deportation. He ordered Hungarian

army units loyal to him to move into Budapest to prevent any takeover attempt from the far right Hungarian Nazis who opposed Horthy and wanted to continue the deportation.

Another story—perhaps both were true and happened simultaneously—indicated that on the same day when the news of Auschwitz’s gas chambers became public, the Allies proceeded with the largest air-raid over Budapest, destroying large industrial sections of the city. Horthy may have assumed that these simultaneous events represented a warning. Also, ambassadors of neutral countries (e.g. Switzerland, Sweden) told Horthy that he would be personally held responsible and tried as a war criminal if he allowed the deportation of the Jews from Budapest.

I witnessed the air raids from the roof of the apartment building where I stayed as an observer to see if any firebombs landed on the house. If a bomb landed, I was to alert people to fight the flames and leave the shelter, where they would suffocate from smoke. What a strange feeling that was! I was not afraid of being hit by a bomb. Somehow I had the notion that since I had escaped German execution, the Allied bombs would not harm me. I observed with a smile on my face the destruction of my native city because it meant that we Hungarian Jews were not forgotten. The end of war was getting nearer, giving some hope for survival. I was not even scared when a bomb exploded nearby and its pressure wave lifted me up and I flew for about 10 feet in the air. My safety helmet, secured with a belt, was ripped off my head. This was my first direct war experience, with many more to follow during the next six months.

Despite the increasing frequency and severity of air raids plus food shortages during the following few weeks, life returned almost to normal in Budapest. First of all, Horthy started to issue exemption papers for certain privileged Jews, such as famous actors, writers, industrialists etc. Given my father’s association with him, we were among the first recipients of the

exemption. My mother returned to the Palace to receive these valuable papers. They meant that we did not have to wear the Star of David anymore, received normal food rations and, like Christian citizens, could move freely in the city at any time. We were even allowed to move back to our old apartment in the Royal Gardens, but experienced a delay because the new occupant had to be relocated first. My father was supposed to be released from the worker's army. An order was sent to his unit to that effect, but the officer in charge simply did not like the order and delayed his release. It may sound strange today that a lieutenant would disobey an order of the Head of State, but these were extraordinary times with lots of confusion and local authorities had unusual power. However, delaying his return to Budapest may have saved his life and mine as well. Treatment of the Jewish labor unit members had improved and corporal punishment ceased. My mother was allowed a short visit and was permitted to travel by train to Komárom to see my father.

Besides Horthy's exemption orders, another saving movement was initiated by neutral countries. The idea of issuing protection affidavits was introduced by the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and followed by other neutral countries. Swedish, Swiss, Portuguese and Spanish embassies issued affidavits to Jews stating that the subject was under their protection and should be treated as citizens of that country. We received an affidavit from the Vatican. This protection was awarded to us because my father had received a decoration from Pope Pius XII because he had contributed to the Pope's reception at the Royal Palace in 1938. And this protection seemed to be highly valuable.

I took advantage of this new situation immediately. I went to the movies, swimming pools and even attended an opera with one of my girlfriends—my first experience of entering that great building. At the beginning of September, I went back to school. But schools were canceled each day following an air raid, which occurred almost every night. When school was canceled, I helped

the unprivileged Jews living in the same building. They still could shop only between 11 AM and 1 PM. There were serious food shortages even early in the morning, but by the time Jews could go shopping, most essential food items had already been sold; the food stores had only empty shelves. To help them, I went around the house in the early mornings to compile a list of the food they needed. These people were grateful for my help and usually rewarded me with substantial tips. I helped my mother with this money because her income was limited to my father's small pension and she was experiencing financial difficulties.

The political situation of Hungary changed suddenly on October 15 when a new wave of threats against Jews' lives resumed. It was a beautiful Sunday morning and as we were playing with our friends in the open corridor, suddenly we saw a big commotion. Our Christian neighbors heard a radio speech by Horthy announcing that Hungary would break with Hitler and would request a separate cease-fire with the Soviets. Also, he suspended all discriminatory regulations against Jews. That was incredible news. Unfortunately, it was impossible to implement, because, the large number of German army units of course stationed in Hungary, were ordered to take over the country. Horthy's sudden peace-move was too late and largely self-serving. He made this announcement after hearing that the Germans had arrested his son Horthy Miklós Junior who was on his way to negotiate a cease-fire with representatives of the Allies.

After learning Horthy's peace message, we started to celebrate, immediately removing the Jewish sign from the gate of the apartment building. All Jews gathered around the gate to observe this action and were crying with happiness. Also, they removed the Stars of David from their clothing. It was an incredible moment; we believed that our suffering was over and our lives were safe.

Unfortunately, our joy lasted only a few hours. Soon, we heard gunfights in the streets. German tanks were heading toward the

Royal Palace where Horthy resided. As a symbolic act, the leader of the Royal Guards, General Lázár, stood at the main gate of the Palace. He pointed his sword against the German tanks and was prepared to defend the palace and the Horthy family. I knew General Lázár because his son was my classmate and a friend of mine. I frequently visited him because he lived in the same Palace complex. The General often played war-games with us and had demonstrated some good wrestling moves for me. General Lázár was arrested at the Palace gate. According to eyewitnesses, in the tradition of great Hungarian officers, he handed over his sword to the leader of the German troops and requested that his sword be given to his son. Horthy was also arrested, and both were deported to the concentration Camp in Dachau, Germany. Parts of the concentration camps in Germany were reserved for political prisoners and high-ranking military officers who objected to Hitler. They received much better treatment than the Jews located in different sections of the camp. Horthy never returned to Hungary.

We were fortunate that we had delayed our move back to our old apartment, which was directly connected to the back entrance of the Royal Palace. We learned later that German army units and their Hungarian Nazi collaborators moved through the building during the siege of the Palace. Some loyal guard members tried to resist and fought against the Nazis in the building. I am sure somebody with the knowledge would have informed the Nazi troops that we were Jews recently returned there under Horthy's protective order and that, most likely, would have resulted in our immediate execution.

The following day a new government was formed. Szálasi Ferencz, the most feared Hungarian Nazi politician, became Prime Minister. Assisted by the German Army, he quickly took full control of Hungary. On the first day of his administration he announced that Hungary would continue fighting along with the Germans until "full victory" was achieved. Firearms were

provided to Nazi “*Nyilas*” party members and they were allowed to use arms against Jews without retribution. All the exception orders Horthy had provided for certain Jewish families were revoked. Our family lost its exempt status and we had to wear the Star of David again. Our movements were limited, and it was unwise to go out into the streets even during the allowed time because the Hungarian Nazis abused and even killed Jews on the street. We realized that we were facing the most dangerous time with little chance of survival if we remained in the Jewish quarters.

The Miracle of our Survival

The new ultra-Nazi Hungarian government moved very quickly to exterminate Jews. By the beginning of November, the Soviet army had crossed into eastern Hungary. The Nazis realized that they did not have much time left for governance and decided to eliminate the remaining Jewish population of Budapest.

I witnessed the first horror, when one morning at 5AM, police rang the bell asking for Jenő bácsi. He and all other men between the ages of 16 and 60 living in the building had to report within 20 minutes with all the essentials they could carry in their backpacks. We were watching them from the upstairs corridor while the police searched every apartment for any additional man who may be hiding. As the men were herded away by the police, they waved farewell to us. I consoled my close friend Pajzs Zsuzsi, who witnessed her father being beaten by the police because he did not move fast enough. He was a very heavy, aged person. Zsuzsi never saw her father again.

Early one morning a few days later, a man rang the doorbell. I opened it. He had the ID papers of Jenő bácsi and told me that he had seen his body next to the highway outside Budapest, found papers in his packet and decided to bring them to the family. We assumed Jenő bácsi decided to escape and he was shot to death by the guards. Jenő bácsi was at least buried decently in Budapest. None of the men taken from our building survived. They were marched to concentration camps in Austria and Germany. By this time Auschwitz, located in Poland, was too close to the advancing Soviet Army to transport more people there. The camps in Austria and Germany did not have gas chambers because that would have been too unseemly for the local population. Instead, in these camps Jews died from starvation, beatings during forced labor, contagious diseases or froze to death during the severe winter of 1945.

Soon an order was posted that all Jewish women between ages 20 and 45 had to report to join work-units (a cover word for deportation). Imagine the desperate feeling Öcsi and I felt when we said farewell to our mother! Fortunately she was released after standing in the open yard of a brick factory in the pouring rain for two days (Budapest in November is cold and rainy).

By early November the Nazis succeeded in isolating an area to create a ghetto in Budapest. The Christian population was evacuated from the district to enable the Nazi authorities to surround it with high walls and seal it off from the rest of the city. All Jews were ordered to move into the ghetto with the exception of those families who had protective affidavits from neutral countries. Protected families had to move into another district of Pest to live in so called “Protected Houses” which were marked with the yellow star and the flag of the protecting countries (e.g., Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal, etc.). This included the protected houses of the Vatican, where our family had to relocate. These orders moving the Jewish population into concentrated areas were clearly a prelude to deportation. At this time, many Jewish families took refuge with trusted Christian friends, who were willing to hide them or who were willing to accept bribes in return for a hiding place. To hide, however, it was essential to obtain fake ID papers with Christian names. However, we hoped that time was on our side, because at night we could hear gunfire from the approaching Soviet Army. They had already occupied (at that time we used the term “liberated”) the eastern part of Hungary.

As we were packing to comply with our forced move to the Vatican-protected house, our distant relative, Boldizsár Iván, appeared in military uniform. He used an assumed identity because he was still hiding from the authorities. Perceiving the imminent danger of the protected-housing, he told my mother that he was unable to provide a hiding place for her but that Öcsi and I should not move to the protected housing. He offered to

take care of us in a better place. He did not tell my mother where we were going because, as a leading member of the Resistance, he was afraid that the Nazi authorities might force my mother to reveal his whereabouts.

Öcsi and I moved to Iván's small two-bedroom apartment, which was located in the prominent villa district of Buda. We met his wife Josette for the first time. She was a French Christian, and even though she was not warned ahead of time about our arrival, she welcomed us warmly. Our life-long warm friendship with Boldizsár Josette and Iván, which started at that moment, extended to Marika as well in later years. The Boldizsár's had a two-year old son Gábor and Josette was pregnant with Miklós. (Miklós became important in the theatre circles of Hungary and he married Koncz Zsuzsi, Peter's favorite Hungarian popular music singer.) Iván did not stay with us. He was still hiding from the authorities because he was a deserter from the Army. Iván was half Jewish but, because his wife was Christian, the Jewish laws did not apply to him. In addition to us, another refugee was hiding in the apartment. He was a former Dutch military officer who escaped from the Nazi POW camp and had been hiding in Hungary for years. We were told that we could not leave our room and must keep quiet so the neighbors would not notice our presence. We were not even allowed to go to the air-raid shelter during the ever-increasing raids. Day and night we stayed in the small room, Öcsi, little Gábor, the Dutch army officer and I with whom the language barrier prevented conversation. The only way to communicate with him was playing chess. (Twenty-four years later when we returned to Europe from California, we met him in Holland. Finally, we had a good conversation in English.) During the next two weeks, our mood was optimistic as we listened to encouraging BBC radio news predicting Allied victory in the near future, as well as hearing the gunfire of the approaching Soviet Army. Through intermediaries we kept in touch with my mother. She was living in the Vatican safe house in very crowded conditions with 12-15 people jam-packed in

one room. Their food supply was at the starvation level, yet they were aware that their condition was far better than that of the Jews living in the Ghetto.

Suddenly a telephone call came and we noticed that Josette, who was usually very calm, became terribly upset. She quickly made some telephone calls and told us that we had to leave immediately. After the end of the war, we learned what happened on that day. Iván, as a leading member of the Hungarian Underground, was attending a meeting to discuss a motion to surrender Hungary to the Soviets and prevent the destruction of the country. Responding to a report, the Gestapo raided the meeting place and arrested all participants. Several people arrested at this meeting were tried and executed. Today most Hungarian towns have streets named after the two leading martyrs arrested in this meeting: Kiss János and Bajcsy-Zsilinsky Endre. Iván was selected by the group to deliver a letter proposing a separate cease-fire between Hungary and the Soviet Union. As he was taken to the Gestapo Headquarter, he swallowed the document, which would have cost him his life if the police had found it. We were fortunate because one member of the group was late in arriving at this meeting. Before entering the building he saw that the police were pushing his compatriots into a truck. He escaped arrest and called all the families, telling them what was happening and warning them that a house search would be likely to follow. Thus the families were able to dispose of evidence related to the Underground. Josette had to act quickly to move us out before the police arrived. A few days later, Iván was somehow released. After the war, he became well known as a writer, journalist and member of the Hungarian Parliament. He published books about his close calls and escapes during the war. Some of these books mention Marika and me.

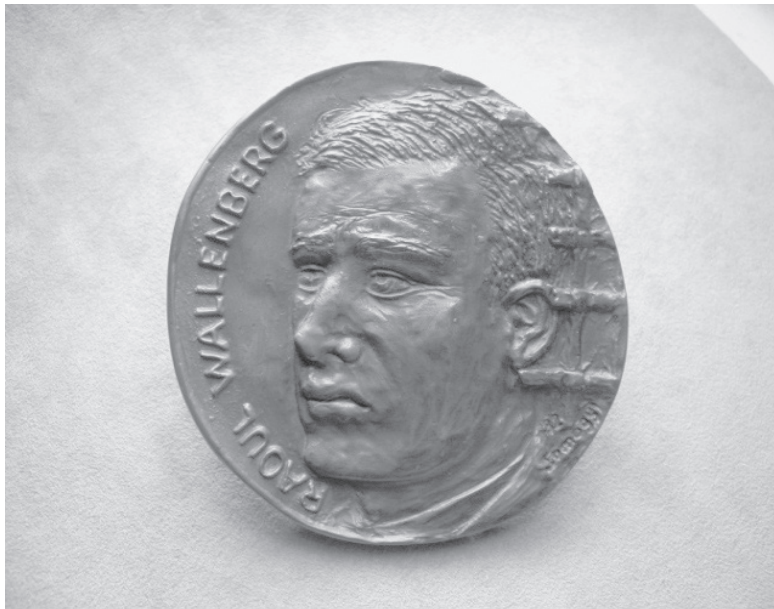


Boldizsár Iván and Marika, in 1968

We left Iván's apartment in a hurry. It was the Dutchman who took us to a safe location before he found a new hiding place for himself. We traveled on a streetcar and he proceeded to make a necessary transfer near our original home. I was trying to explain to him that it was dangerous, because some former neighbor might recognize us and report us to the police. But he did not understand my panic. We had to wait at that streetcar stop for a long time. Fortunately, it was already dark and nobody recognized us. As Josette instructed him, he took us to the Swedish Embassy. Josette knew about Wallenberg's rescue mission and had telephoned to notify them about our arrival. Öcsi and I stayed overnight at the Embassy.

The next morning, a Swedish Embassy employee took Öcsi and me to a safe place. This was part of the rescue activities of Raoul Wallenberg, which saved an estimated 20,000 Jews in Budapest, who included Öcsi and me and assured our survival. Among his many deals, Wallenberg reached an agreement with Dominican monks to house Hungarian Jewish boys, provided that each possessed dependable Christian identity papers. Öcsi and I were able to use our real birth certificates, because they indicated that we were protestant at birth and that our name was not Jewish—thus we passed the entrance requirement for this sanctuary. I suspect that Wallenberg negotiated this arrangement by paying for this service. His mission was financed by the United States. This action was one of his many ingenious acts that saved Hungarian Jews. He was a true hero, and it was a great tragedy that he was later arrested by the Soviet army for reasons still unknown. After spending years in Soviet prisons he perished. His tragic story is memorialized in several books, including one excellent book written by Kati Marton.

Marika created her first art medal to commemorate Wallenberg. She presented it to Wallenberg's sister when she came to San Francisco to attend a ceremony naming a high school after Wallenberg. Congressman Tom Lantos was also present. He introduced a bill in the U.S. Congress to honor Wallenberg by making him an "Honorary Citizen of the United States". This was the second occasion on which Congress granted this honor; Winston Churchill was the first.



**Raoul Wallenberg – Holocaust Hero.
A Bronze Medal – Created by Marika Somogyi**

The place where Öcsi and I stayed was similar to a college fraternity house in the United States. Catholic students lived there during their college years. At that time, however, all college-age men served in the military or hid somewhere; therefore, the establishment was vacant. After arrival we immediately realized that all the boy occupants staying there were Jewish children between the ages of 6 and 16. We stayed in an adequate room and even received some education from the resident teachers. The food supply was limited, but we did not starve. One of the difficulties was that in a Catholic establishment attendance at mass was mandatory. At 5 AM every morning we went to the in-house chapel to demonstrate our good Christian faith. The problem was that Catholic ceremonies have strict rules regarding when to stand, kneel, repeat the Latin text of the mass etc. and we were unfamiliar with those rituals. Fortunately, one of the Jewish boys had attended a Catholic high school and he knew the ritual. He positioned himself on the front row and we all imitated what he was doing.

Another unpleasant routine was that, because most of the children had new identity papers with fake names, they had to memorize all the information in the papers in case the Nazis raided the place to conduct interrogations. To practice for the possibility of such an event, we were often awakened in the middle of night to answer questions such as: What's your name? Your mother's name? Birthplace? etc., and to recite a Catholic prayer as well. Early in December a suspicious policeman showed up and questioned the headmaster. By that time the Soviet Army had occupied a large part of eastern Hungary. Thus the official story was that all children staying in the establishment were refugees from the Soviet-occupied part of the country and that during their escape they had been separated from their parents. The story satisfied the police, but we started to worry that it was only a prelude to a more thorough investigation. Many children who could find another safe place left at that time.

That day I suddenly felt an urge to discuss this situation with my mother. I went to visit her and perhaps explore the possibility of joining her. As I indicated, she lived in a Vatican-protected safe house in a distant section of Pest. I found her living in deplorable conditions, sleeping on the floor among 25-30 people in a room without heat, food or proper sanitation. The district consisted mostly of protected Jewish houses. I observed that the area was bursting with Nazi police herding Jews in apparent confusion.

My mother was happy to see me but she was terribly worried about my being there. I soon realized that it would be impossible for Öcsi and me to join her. She begged me to quickly return to my hiding place and let her know by postcard that I had arrived back safely. She came down with me to the gate and waved goodbye. Her farewell look remained on my mind during the next nine months. I made it back safely to our hiding place. My mother was evacuated the same evening, herded into a cattle wagon and deported to Bergen-Belsen in northern Germany. She of course did not know whether I had been able to return safely to our housing or not and thought about our brief reunion during the rest of her ordeals.

From the cattle wagon, she threw out several postcards addressed to my father and some benevolent person posted two of these cards. They express heart-breaking farewell messages, envisioning the worst to come. I still have these cards and even now, 64 years later, I still choke up every time I reread them. My father forwarded these cards to me. This is how I learned that my mother was deported within a few hours after I visited her. I still wonder if I had had a premonition that prompted me to undertake this very dangerous visit to see her on that particular day.

Translation of the message:

“My Dear Pista:

I have been drafted as well. Together with Maja we are moving on a train toward Hegyeshalom [i.e., a Hungarian town on

the border with Austria]. You can relax about the kids; they remained at home in a good place. The good God will be with us and perhaps allow that all four of us be together again in this life. Be very careful, I will do the same. God bless you, my Pista. With many kisses,
Your Szuszi.”

On the front of the card:

To:” Somogyi István, military working unit, Komárom.

If you are permitted write a postcard and send it to: Mrs. Fritz Sándor (Irma néni, sister of Jenő bácsi) Pozsonyi-street 30. I hope she is still staying there. She can inform you about the kids.”

A second card arrived (not shown here) with the following message:

“My Dear Pista:

Our train just arrived to Győr. We received boiled potatoes and tea, and I still have some food, which I carried with me from home. I have a warm blanket as well, so I am feeling comfortable. You should not worry about me; I am well and very strong. I still want to meet you and the children, God will help all of us. If you do not receive any more news from me don’t worry—I don’t know if we will be permitted to write letters. Please take care of yourself and you should be praying as well.

With lots of love and kisses, Your Szuszi.”

Deportation of Jews ceased after Budapest was surrounded by the Soviet Army. Thus, my mother was among the last of those on the transports leaving Budapest. We found out later that she was fortunate to have been removed from Budapest. We were hiding near the Danube and every night we heard machine-gun fire. When transportation of Jews from Budapest became impossible because all roads were blocked by the Soviet Army, the Hungarian Nazis herded many of the remaining Jews to the banks of the Danube,

We heard that refugees from the Soviet-occupied zones of Hungary received special food-ration cards and cash from the authorities. I decided to take advantage of this privilege and went to the district government office, saying that I had escaped from a city occupied by the Soviets. I explained to the official that: “our family had to escape, because my father was a Nazi party member. As we were walking toward Budapest we were at the center of a severe air raid and in the confusion I became separated from my parents”. The official believed my story and issued a refugee card that entitled me to cash and special food rations. Since I was a short kid, as I stood next to the desk of the official, I was able to steal some refugee document forms from his desk unnoticed while he was filling out my card. I gave the empty forms to my friends to fill in with their false names—such refugee papers may have saved the lives of other Jewish children. Certainly it took some guts to appear at a government office because if they had somehow identified me as a Jew I would have been immediately deported.

December 24, 1944, Christmas day, was certainly a memorable one. In the morning, as “good Catholics,” we were setting up the tree and we were promised a festive dinner with special food for dinner, including sweets. At mid-day, Boldizsár Iván, wearing a military uniform came to visit us quite unexpectedly. We learned this way that the Gestapo had released him from jail. What a person! His movements were risky because his military papers were faked, and he could have been stopped by the military police. Despite all this danger he came to bring us presents and to find out how we were doing.

That evening, the Soviet guns were particularly loud, but I volunteered to help bring dinner from the college kitchen located a couple of blocks from the dormitory. Moving in the streets was quite difficult; both because of the many ruins and because the Germans used the cobble-stones for building barricades facing the nearby square, which would be the likely point of attack by

the Soviet Army. As we were heading back carrying a heavy load of precious food, a bomb suddenly exploded only a few yards from us. I was not injured, but a soldier walking nearby was hit by shrapnel and lost one of his arms. We still managed to carry the dinner to our rooms. But the sound of guns became increasingly louder. On Christmas evening, the Soviet army surrounded Budapest. Every road into the city was occupied by them and the hill-district of the city, including the Boldizsár's home where we had hidden earlier, was occupied by Soviet tanks. Soon after Iván returned from visiting us, his home was surrounded by the Soviet Army.

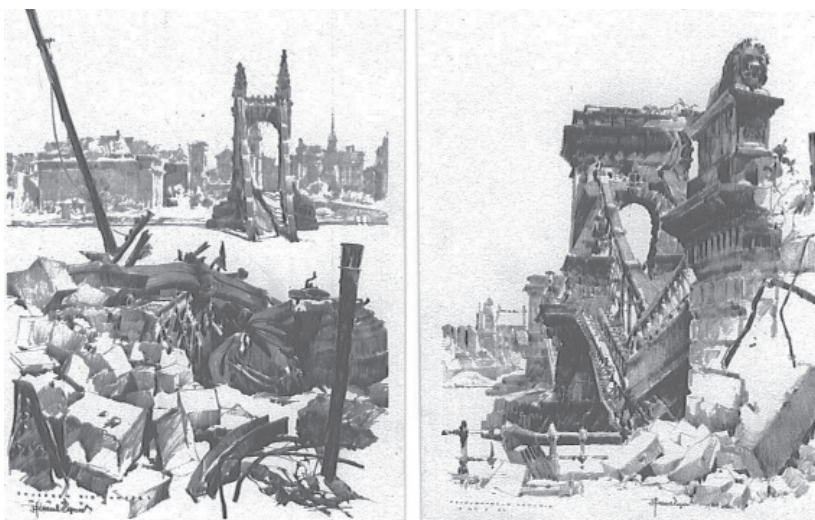
Around the same time, a Soviet officer with prominently displayed white flags approached the German front line. He was sent to offer an arrangement whereby the city of Budapest would be spared further damage. Also, he promised that German and Hungarian military could pass freely within Soviet lines and move to Germany. Instead of receiving this unarmed Soviet military officer, a German soldier shot him dead without warning. This was a criminal act that ignored all international protocols. Unfortunately, the population of Budapest paid the price for this criminal act. As a consequence of this atrocity, Stalin ordered full military assaults against the city. No lives or property were to be spared, allowing robbery and rape by the Soviet soldiers as their reward for bravery. The long and terrible siege of Budapest started. The Germans were ordered to resist the Soviet advance and defend the city at any cost; no surrender was permitted for the troops in their hopeless situation.

Under normal circumstances, the severity of the siege of Budapest would have created international news and concern. But it coincided with the famous "Battle of the Bulge" in Belgium, the cruel fight of American and British forces against the Nazis. Hitler decided to take a last-ditch stand against the Allied forces as they approached Germany. This crucial fight occupied the attention of the world and the casualties in this battle were among

the worst in World War II.

We experienced one of the coldest winters on record. Although we suffered in unheated rooms, at least the frost prevented the decomposition of the thousands of unburied dead bodies that by now lay all over the city streets. We saw death everywhere when we went outside looking for food. Often we begged food from German soldiers and they, believing we were Christians, shared their food with us. One of the terrible sights was that the military still used horses for transportation. When a horse was hit by gunfire, starving people ran out with knives to cut the meat off the dying animals.

One morning in January our house was shaken by an extremely large explosion. Soon we learned that all bridges connecting Buda with Pest had been destroyed by the Germans to prevent the Soviet advance. Buda and Pest were completely disconnected for over one year, and ten years were needed to rebuild all seven connecting permanent bridges over the Danube.



“Erzsébet” and “Lánç” bridges in Budapest after the siege of Budapest, 1945

During the siege of Budapest, the Soviet Army fought a street-to-street battle against the Nazis. Bombs from the air and artillery on the ground spread destruction day and night. Most people moved into underground air-raid shelters, but I felt confident that Allied guns would not kill me so we just stayed in our room until January 2 1945. On that morning, a bomb exploded nearby and all the windows were shattered, exposing us to the very cold winter. This forced us to move to the air-raid shelter, be it ever so reluctantly, because, first of all, it was extremely uncomfortable. There were no windows and thus the air was horrible. We slept on the floor close to each other. The water supply was limited to melting snow from the yard and sanitation was nonexistent. Most importantly, because we had to share shelter with Christian inhabitants as well as with the monks from the nearby buildings, we had to watch every word we said in order to avoid revealing our Jewish identity. The Nazi district headquarters was located across the street and, if somebody became suspicious, it would have been easy to report us, which would have resulted in our immediate execution.

After a few days, we were so annoyed with shelter living that a friend and I decided that maybe we could block the windows to make the room more habitable. Our room was on the third floor and soon after we arrived the bombs came ever closer. We felt terrified and moved under the bed for protection. Within a few seconds, we heard an incredible explosion. Suddenly we could not see anything because of dense dust. We heard terrible cries from nearby. Although blinded by dust, we still managed to climb down the stairs. There we saw that one wing of our apartment building had been hit by a bomb and that part of the entire building had collapsed. We could hear the cries of people buried there and immediately started to dig to save the injured. We also removed several dead bodies. The destroyed wing of the building had been occupied by the regular population so none of my fellow Jewish children were hurt. The shelter did not collapse. Öcsi was staying there and was not allowed to exit. In the

meantime I could not return to the shelter for some time because I was assisting in rescue efforts, removing the rubble over buried people. Öcsi knew that I had gone upstairs and heard the news about the collapsed building. For over an hour, until I finally returned to the shelter, he feared that I was among the dead. Imagine his joy when he finally saw me. A few days later I returned to the room we had been in at the time of the explosion to find that many very large iron pieces from the bomb were strewn all over the room. My friend and I did not receive even a small scratch. Presumably moving quickly under the bed had spared us from injury and perhaps even saved our lives.

I have to share a *lighthearted* story from this tragic period. I shared the room with older, highly cultured boys. Like many middle-class Jewish youngsters, they were familiar with classical music. I experienced my first exposure to Beethoven symphonies because they sang or whistled tunes from these masterpieces every night and often sang opera arias as well. Recently, my music critic friend János Gereben asked his readers to share their memories of when they enjoyed a piece of classical music for the first time. He published my response as follows:

“In January 1945, I was hiding in a Budapest shelter with several other kids, when we heard the guns of the approaching Soviet Army. One of the older boys started to sing Osmin’s aria from Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, “*Wie will ich triumphieren*,” in Hungarian. This is a rather explicit aria about the standing gallows—so we all understood the underlying meaning of hanging the Nazi leaders. Soon all the kids were singing this aria together. A strange setting for starting a life-long love of Mozart.”---- László Somogyi

Our premonition came true in 1946. Most of the Hungarian Nazi leaders had escaped to Germany but were then captured by the American Army. They were extradited at the request of the democratic Hungarian regime, tried and hanged. Their trial

was short and concluded even before the start of the Nuremberg trials of the German Nazis. Newsreels of their executions are played near the exit of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. However, Horthy Miklós was spared. After the October 15 1944 Nazi takeover, he was deported to Dachau where, as noted above, he received the privileged treatment reserved for political prisoners. At the end of the war, Horthy was captured by the Americans. The Hungarians wanted to try him as a war criminal, but the Allies refused to extradite him. He was allowed to live with his family in Portugal and never returned to Hungary.

*A Memorable Day of Liberation:
January 16, 1945*

On January 16, the Soviet army occupied the entire Pest side of the city. We had been liberated from Nazi prosecution and now experienced the start of an entirely new and different era.

German soldiers were determined to stop the advancing Soviet army. Starting shortly after Christmas in the front of our residence, German soldiers lined up behind a barricade built from the street's cobblestones. Assuming the Soviet army would approach from the adjacent Calvin Square, they positioned their guns to face in that direction. Occasionally we talked with these German soldiers and sometimes they even shared their food rations with us. But instead of exposing themselves to German fire, the Soviet soldiers had adopted another, better strategy. Since the beginning of the war, every apartment building had had an underground air-raid shelter. These shelters were connected to those in adjacent buildings, with emergency exits to allow for escape in case the house was hit by a bomb and rubble blocked the regular exit. These exits provided the routes for the Soviet soldiers to advance. They moved to underground air-raid shelters and progressed from house to house through the connecting emergency doors.

We were surprised when our emergency door opened suddenly. Machine-gun shots were fired into the air to check for possible resistance from German soldiers or collaborators. After they experienced no resistance from our shelter, a group of Soviet soldiers came in. This was probably one of the happiest moments of my life. We tearfully hugged the arriving Soviet soldiers as they shouted to us in Russian: "*Vojna Caput*"—the war is over. It was over only for us, however; these brave soldiers still had a long fight ahead before the Germans finally capitulated five months later. The soldiers did not waste much time. They moved

toward the next shelter and then came up to the streets to kill all the German defenders from behind. Two days later, the entire Pest side of the city was occupied by the Soviet Army. On the Buda side however, street fights continued for another month.

We truly believed that this day was the beginning of a happy and peaceful era for us. Unfortunately, we still had trying times ahead. First of all, we did not know anything about the fate of our parents or whether any of our relatives or family friends had survived the Holocaust. My brother and I were alone in a ruined city without money and like all the other people we were starving. One day I found a substantial quantity of red beet stored in the cellar and for weeks I ate only boiled beets, starting my life-long aversion to that excellent vegetable.

For years we felt grateful to the Soviets for liberating us from the Nazis. Even when we witnessed unjustifiably brutal actions on their part, we accepted their excuses. We remained in the shelter until we could make our room livable. In the shelter we witnessed rapes by Soviet soldiers and robbery of valuable property, especially watches. At the least resistance to surrendering such items, the soldiers shot people on the spot.

The monks still allowed us to stay, but we realized that soon we must find an alternative residence and vacate the place. The Swedes had made incredible efforts to save us from the Nazis but were unable to protect us during the Soviet occupation. Therefore a few days later I decided to go back to Teréz-körút, our last residence where we had lived during the summer. I was hoping to get news from friends or relatives and to find out if any of our property had survived. I walked for about four miles in the snow, witnessing the collapsed houses and many unburied bodies. Streets were blocked by rubble, and I had to make detours and watch out for the potential collapse of damaged buildings. It was bitterly cold. The streets were covered with snow and the soles of my shoes had large holes.

By this time, the city was occupied by thousands of Soviet soldiers. These army units behaved quite differently from the first-line fighters. The occupying army appeared to be quite disorganized. These soldiers broke into every intact store, confiscating the few remaining items of merchandise. Their main activity was collecting anything transportable, especially watches and jewelry. They drank all alcoholic beverages they could find, including preservative alcohol they found at the biology lab of the University.

The most horrible experience was passing the former ghetto where thousands of frozen bodies were piled up like wood blocks. These people had died of starvation, disease, or had frozen to death. The ghetto was mined with explosives, with the Nazi order to blow it up when the Soviet army approached. Fortunately, the scared German commander negotiated a deal with the Soviets to surrender the ghetto and its occupants if his personal freedom was guaranteed.

During my walk, I experienced one pleasant episode; I discovered one public street toilet that was open, still intact and clean. After four weeks of sharing a bucket with all the occupants of the shelter, using this facility presented an almost forgotten experience and great pleasure.

Arriving at the Teréz-körút building I was relieved that it had not received significant damage during the siege. Climbing up the stairs, I worried about finding familiar people. All Jews had been forced to move out of this apartment house in October and I learned that nobody had yet returned. Our former apartment was vacant but I could not get inside. I visited our Christian ex-neighbor, the Janda³ family. They had extended their friendship

3 Janda name was familiar to most people in Budapest. Janda bácsi owned a private detective agency specializing in divorce cases and every telephone booth displayed his advertisement showing a Sherlock Holmes drawing with a humorous rhyme meaning: when suspicion arise contact Mr. Janda.

In Hungarian: "Felmerül a sanda gyanu, kinyomozza Janda Samu."

to us even when it was dangerous to be friendly to Jews because the Nazi police often arrested people who helped Jews. Their only child, Szilveszter, remained my friend until his tragic early death at the age of 20. Janda néni was crying as she hugged me and invited me for lunch. I still remember that we had “*Potato Paprikás*”—an incredible treat when most people were starving in Budapest. They had not yet heard from any member of our family or friends. Because telephone or mail service had not been restored, we hoped that surviving friends or relatives would look for us at our last legal residence and thus it was crucial that they knew my current address.

Walking back to my residence, I passed soldiers clearing out all remaining merchandise from a department store. The soldiers gave some products they could not carry to people passing by. One friendly soldier gave me a big roll of wool. It was very heavy to carry but I took it hoping to barter it for food. A few blocks later, however, another soldier seized it. Instead of saying, “thank you,” for my having carried it, he kicked my ass.

At that time we still lived in the shelter. As I arrived, I found Öcsi playing in the snow in the shelter courtyard. When I was heading toward the shelter, Öcsi warned me to stay out of it because drunken Soviet soldiers were threatening the occupants. They stated they would kill every third person unless they were given watches or other valuables. It was hard to believe that Öcsi had remained near the site, instead of disappearing until this episode was over. Naturally I told him off using some proper Hungarian curses. Eventually the soldiers left peacefully after they grabbed some valuable items.

Usually, Öcsi and I got along very well. I recall only one more conflict between us. While still starving, I learned that a nearby bakery was starting bread production but its water line was broken. Water is essential for bread making and thus the bakery was seeking help to deliver water from a distant source. The reward for a half-day’s work was a loaf of bread—which was otherwise sold at black-

market prices to people who could afford it. I volunteered to carry buckets of water and received a large loaf. I shared it with Öcsi. We immediately ate half of it and decided to save the other half for next day. We put the remaining portion next to our sleeping compartment. Poor Öcsi woke up that night very hungry, took a nibble of bread, than another etc. When I woke up in the morning, the entire loaf was gone. I beat him up, which I have regretted in retrospect.

One of my survival tactics would have been illegal in normal times. We discovered a vacant apartment containing food. The place belonged to a Nazi party member who worried about being arrested after liberation and thus had fled hurriedly with his entire family. They left behind valuable food items, including sacks of potatoes, flour, sugar etc. We broke into the empty apartment at night and took all the food items. Now we possessed food for a couple of weeks and shared it with our remaining small group. By this time, many boys had been reunited with surviving family members and had left the place.

On February 16, 1945 after a long siege, the entire city of Budapest was liberated by the Soviet Army. The last site of the German defense was around the Royal Palace where our original home was located. Our former residence and the surrounding area, including my father's domain the Royal Gardens, were leveled during the siege. The house where we lived for 14 years was never restored. Today there is a public park at its location. On the last day of the battle, the Germans finally decided to break through the 200-mile Soviet front lines rather than surrender. However, doing so was an impossible venture and the last German soldier was killed even before reaching the outskirts of Budapest. The leader of the defending German army hid in the sewage canal—the proper place for him—but he was soon discovered and he ended his undistinguished carrier in a Siberian POW camp. For a few more days after liberation, Öcsi and I struggled alone having no idea what to do next. One day, unexpectedly, Klári néni visited us. She had learned about our whereabouts from Janda néni. We had a very emotional reunion as she was the

first person from my past I met after liberation. She had been my mother's best friend since childhood and I had always been fond of her. She learned from me that my mother had been deported and that we had no idea about my father's fate. She immediately assured me that they would adopt me if my parents had not survived. Klári néni was married three times but had no children. During the previous nine months, she and her dear husband Laci bácsi had hidden in a small room. Their apartment had been destroyed. Before the Jewish discriminatory laws, Laci bácsi was an executive of the Budapest transportation system. He had been reinstated in his old job, with all streetcar and bus personnel once again under his jurisdiction. Now they were living in the basement of the office building set up as a large dormitory for the homeless personnel of the company. Klári néni asked me to move and live with them. But, as only one additional person as a member of their family was allowed to move in with them, we agreed to find someone first to take care of Öcsi, from whom I did not want to be separated.

Soon afterwards, Böske néni, my father's sister came to visit us. She had learned our address from Janda néni as well. She worked as a nurse far outside Budapest. Her hospital treated wounded Soviet soldiers and a military truck brought her to the city. She brought food and assured us that she would make contact with two other siblings of my father. They were still living in Hajdunánás, where life would be more peaceful.

Then, unexpectedly, we found an opportunity for Öcsi. Again, through the Janda's, another person located us. Nikolics Ági was the sister of one of our roommates in the Jewish housing unit during the summer. Ági was married to a Christian and therefore had been exempt from Jewish laws. Ági came to see us to find out if I had learned anything regarding her sister Maja's whereabouts. I told her the bad news that Maja had been deported along with my mother and that I had no further information regarding their fate. (My mother and Maja remained together throughout the deportation.) When she realized our current problem, she offered to take

care of Öcsi until a more permanent situation became available. They lived outside Budapest in a shoe factory where her husband was an executive. At that time, the factory manufactured shoes for the Soviet military, and they thus received plenty of food and lived in decent housing. This was a generous offer from someone we had met only during visits to her family with whom we shared the apartment in Teréz-körút.

Klári néni hired a man to walk the long 10 miles with Öcsi to the Nikolics' household in Ujpest. I then joined Klári néni to live with her in the office building. During the next few weeks, I helped her clean an apartment she had inherited from a brother-in-law who perished in the Holocaust. (The former home of Klári néni was destroyed during the siege and they were allowed to move into this new place.) To make the apartment into a livable home required substantial work. The apartment had been a Swedish safe house occupied by numerous people during the siege. Without water, electricity and basic sanitation, the apartment was in a neglected state and required major restoration before it could be inhabited again. During the next few weeks, I joined Klári néni for our daily long walk to this apartment and helped her clean up. I anticipated moving in with them soon when another opportunity arose, changing yet again the course of our hectic existence.

Böske néni came to tell us that she could contact Miklós bácsi and Kató néni, my father's other siblings in Hajdunánás. They were all alive and well, and had not suffered much during the war. The Soviet Army did not face German resistance in their district and properties were not damaged. Life had returned to relatively normal for them. They invited Öcsi and me to live with them until our parents returned. On March 17, on my father's 42nd birthday, Öcsi and I departed with Böske néni for the long and hazardous trip to Hajdunánás. The most important item we carried with us was our woolen blanket because we anticipated sleeping outdoors during the journey.

***Relocating to Hajdunánás:
March 17 1945***

Traveling at this time was a great adventure. Regular passenger trains did not yet operate because heavy fighting against the Germans was still in progress in Western Hungary. Therefore, only freight trains operated to transport troops and military supplies. We wanted to travel toward Eastern Hungary and from time to time Soviet soldiers allowed civilians to ride on the freight trains. But the scheduling and destinations of the trains were tentative. For security reasons, information was based on rumors only. The Soviet military told us nothing and we did not speak their language anyway.

On the morning of our departure, the three of us walked to the train station. Far removed from the terminal we found a long freight train bursting with Hungarian civilians wanting to travel in the same direction as we did. They assumed that the train would depart soon. Not knowing any alternative solution, we climbed into the freight railway wagon and sat on the floor for 20 hours until the train finally departed. By reading the passing station names we established that we were heading toward our destination. After a few hours the train stopped and the soldiers ordered us to get off. By then, we had traveled about a third of the way to our destination. The badly damaged station had no restrooms or food vendors. We had to sit outdoors on the ground waiting for the next train, which arrived the next day. This train was heading in the right direction, but it had only open freight cars loaded with coal. Our only choice was to climb up and sit on the top of coal. Eventually, the train started to move slowly so that we were exposed only to moderate winds. We arrived at Debrecen, an important train hub where we needed to transfer from the main line to a local train going to Hajdunánás. We found out that the rails leading to Hajdunánás were not yet repaired and that no train to our final destination was available. After another

long wait, a train did arrive that was heading toward a city located about 15 miles from Hajdunánás. This was the best available route, so this time we climbed inside a cattle wagon to complete our travel. Then we walked to Hajdunánás, which in our poor physical condition presented a difficult task. After the three-day ordeal, we finally arrived at Hajdunánás. Our aunts, uncles and cousins welcomed us with enthusiasm. We were thankful to live at last among our family in peaceful and well-organized homes.

It was decided even before our arrival that Öcsi would stay in Miklós bácsi's house, and I with Kató néni. Öcsi had a difficult time adjusting to this situation. When we met on Sundays, he complained bitterly that Ella néni (Miklós bácsi's wife) was a nasty person. By contrast, I adapted easily to my family. Kató néni was married to Lajos bácsi, a high school language teacher. He had a somewhat odd personality, but I respected and liked him. I developed a very warm relationship with my cousins. Katica, who was two years younger than I, was a nice playmate and we commiserated when our housework was too demanding. (In 1974, Peter met and became friends with Katica's children when we were visiting Budapest). Ferkó was seven years older than I. He had been studying chemistry at Budapest University but came home to escape the siege and potential military induction. We were all required to help around the house, mainly in the yard planting vegetables, harvesting fruit, and feeding chickens, ducks, geese and a pig. We all shared these tasks so I did not feel any unfairness.

However, I had to adapt to an entirely new life. Hajdunánás was an agricultural center that offered little deviation in the daily routine. The town did not even have a movie theater, swimming pool or pastry shop. It was an incredible change from my previous existence in Budapest. Playing football (soccer) represented the main entertainment for local men. Occasionally, we participated in organized school dancing, which was limited to dancing the czardas, accompanied by Hungarian folk music. It was easy

to learn how to dance the czardas. The local country girls were kind but I felt like an outsider. These girls were very different from our more sophisticated Jewish friends in Budapest. One of my classmates, Hegedüs Lóránt, soon became my close friend. I heard that he became a Presbyterian bishop and a politician. As such he became an infamous leader of the Hungarian neo-Nazi movement. (Presently, his son with the same name is a leader of the Nazi-movement).

At this time I found that I looked very much like my father at the same age. One day, as I was walking through the farmers' market, a peasant woman asked if I was the son of Somogyi István. She did not know that I was in town. She recognized me because some 30 years earlier she had worked for my grandmother as a domestic helper. She said that I looked exactly like a teenage version of my father.

I immediately started to attend the local Protestant high school. In the short period between March and June, I finished the 4th grade (equivalent to 8th grade in the United States). I studied in the same school my father had attended some 25 years earlier. Several of the regular teachers had fled when the Soviet troops came close, creating a shortage. To fill the vacancies, several old retired teachers returned to work, some of whom had taught my father. They recognized me and paid extra attention to my progress. My uncle, Lajos bácsi, was a highly respected teacher of French, German and Hungarian literature in the same school. I walked with him to school every morning, which probably made a great impression on my classmates. Also, my cousin Ferkó was engaged as a temporary teacher of chemistry and math. Several classmates' parents had been childhood friends of my father and they were extremely kind and hospitable toward me. I am sure most of them were familiar with my Jewish background, but never brought up the subject; in fact, they never even asked about my experiences during the siege of Budapest. Attending Sunday services and religious classes was mandatory at the

school. Moreover, by the age of 14, it was time to prepare for confirmation in the Calvinist Church. Having no alternatives, I learned the religious routine and participated in spiritual activities and ceremonies. As a result, I was confirmed as a Presbyterian.

In the meantime I was confident that our stay in Hajdunánás was only temporary. My heart was still in Budapest, even if the city was in ruins. Every day I passed by the empty house of my grandparents, reminding me of our losses. Often I woke up in the middle of the night hearing the neighborhood dogs barking. I imagined that they were barking at my father who was approaching. In the meantime, postal service was restored and I received letters from Klári néni reminding me that they were willing to adopt me. Also, my aunt Márta néni returned to Budapest from hiding in Baja and assured me that she would take care of me should it become necessary.

On April 4, the Soviet Army occupied the entire country. The Nazis were finally driven out from Hungary, but the war still raged on in Germany for another month. In December, I received the last postcard from my father that he had mailed in Hungary. I was hoping he was alive, liberated by now and that we would hear from him soon. Unfortunately, we did not receive any news from him for another two months. In fact, the worst ordeal for him began around March. When the Soviet troops approached Komárom, his unit was forced to march on foot to Austria. He was herded into the infamous Mauthausen Concentration Camp (near Linz, Austria).

On several occasions, he told us a moving episode from this period. As his unit was marching toward Austria, they had a rest near the border. He was sitting in the front of a power plant. He remembered that a Christian childhood friend of my mother Duci néni was married to the chief engineer of this plant and that they lived in the complex. He sent a message to her through

an employee explaining that he was sitting at the front of the gate. Soon, she came out bringing precious food to my father. She even hugged him in front of the Nazi guards. Nobody was allowed to mix with Jewish prisoners. But, despite threats from the guards, she sat with him until the unit was ordered to continue the march. This was the last human warmth my father experienced for a long time. After the war, my father sent flowers to Duci néni on each anniversary of their encounter.

*Survival and Return of my Parents:
July-September 1945*

On May 5, 1945, the Germans surrendered. The horrible war in Europe was finally over. About three weeks later, the Red Cross notified us that my father was alive, staying at an American refugee camp until transportation to Hungary was possible. This was joyous news, but we withheld full celebration because we did not yet have any news regarding my mother. We would not hear about her for several more months.

In mid-July, my father finally arrived in Budapest and settled into the large apartment Márta néni had in Teréz-körút. This was the former Jewish housing where we had lived during the previous summer. Train transportation was still sporadic, with no timetables yet; therefore, we had no information about when he would be able to travel to Hajdunánás. One morning, as I was returning from the fields, I noticed a man in uniform waving at me. It was father! He was wearing an American military uniform and he was so skinny that I did not recognize him until I got closer. It was a fantastic day. I will never forget it.

During his brief stay, my father told us of his ordeals and miraculous survival. He was forced on a long march all the way to Dresden in Germany. He was there when the Allies conducted one of the most severe air raids in the war, practically leveling the city. He shared an air-raid shelter with the locals. Perhaps he could have escaped in the confusion, but he would not have known what to do within Germany. If captured, he would have been executed. From Dresden they marched to Mauthausen and were held at that most notorious concentration camp. Because of starvation and disease, survival in the camp for most prisoners was about three months. He jumped on a truck taking prisoners to another work camp because he felt that working for the Germans could save his life. He was moved to a smaller work camp

near Gunzkirchen, Austria, doing hard work in a mine until he contracted typhoid. This illness is lethal without medical help. He was in a coma when the American Army liberated the camp. He could not recall liberation when he woke up in an army hospital. He was well taken care of there and within a few weeks he had fully recovered. The Allied camp supervisor was a Belgian captain. Since my father spoke French, he became his interpreter. This job provided him with certain privileges, the most important of which was his ability to return to Budapest on the first available transport. Also, soon after he regained consciousness, he received the news that Öcsi and I were alive.

He stayed only a few days with us in Hajdunánás, hoping that back in Budapest he would be able to receive news from my mother. Also (although he never mentioned this to me), I sensed that he was very disappointed at the ungenerous behavior of his siblings. They had collected all the valuables from his parents' home when they moved to the Ghetto. Yet they never offered to share anything with my father, even when he returned from deportation wearing only a used military uniform donated by the American army.

This incident was, unfortunately, the first sign of what was happening to most Jews who returned from deportation. The general practice was that the valuables given to friends or even relatives for safekeeping were never returned to the original owner. The valuables had usually already been exchanged for food or cigarettes. The usual excuse given to the owner was: "The Russian soldiers seized it".

Öcsi and I were saddened when my father told us that we would remain in Hajdunánás until he could find more permanent housing. He was immediately reinstated in his old position. But, because the Royal Gardens were in complete ruins, the only activity consisted of cleaning rubble. He was entitled to get another apartment from the State, but it took a long time to find a vacant

place to accommodate us. Thus, we remained in Hajdunánás hoping for news from our mother and waiting impatiently for a family reunion. We felt increasingly worried as the weeks and months passed without any news from mother. My father visited the Red Cross office in Budapest daily where news of surviving prisoners was posted. At last, in mid-September, the miracle happened. Unannounced, mother arrived in Budapest. Imagine our joy!

Her story is almost unbelievable in light of the present state of communication. She was liberated at the end of April by the Soviet army. She was held in a camp near Graz, Austria, about 250 miles from Budapest. The camp was run by the Soviet Army and they did not feel any urgency to repatriate the former German captives. They were fed somewhat better than in the German concentration camps, but she could not send or receive news of the family. Finally in September, she and Maja climbed over the camp's fence at night and walked all the way to the Hungarian border, where she climbed onto a freight train heading for Budapest. As she arrived at the railway station in Budapest, she had the most traumatic half-mile walk to the house in Teréz-körút, where she hoped to find out something regarding the fate of her husband and children. As she approached the house, my friend Janda Szilveszter recognized her from a distance and shouted: "Pista bácsi and your children are alive and well". At this moment my mother fainted and fell to the ground.

This story illustrates the contrast in treatment that liberated Nazi prisoners experienced between the Americans and the Soviets. Starting in 1944 December, she was held in Bergen-Belsen, an infamous concentration camp. Because of her Vatican protection status she was placed in a privileged part of the camp and was treated much better than most of the other deportees. She was starving, but otherwise she was not exposed to mistreatment. In mid-April a group of protected prisoners, including my mother, was put on a train heading to Switzerland. An agreement

between the Allies and Germans was reached to exchange Jewish prisoners with captive German officers held in this neutral country. My mother's group was selected to fulfill the exchange. However, they never arrived in Switzerland. Assuming it was a military transport, Allied planes bombed the train, killing many prisoners. My mother was mercifully not injured. Soon, the Soviet Army arrived in the area. She was liberated and placed in a "peaceful" Soviet camp. She waited there for over three months for transportation. Finally, she escaped from the camp and traveled to Budapest.

Soon, both my mother and father came to Hajdunánás to reunite with us and take us back to Budapest. After 18 months, the four of us were together again. It was a miracle! As the train approached Budapest from the eastern direction, my parents were preparing to get off the train. I was astonished and asked, "Why are we getting out here? Aren't we proceeding to Western Europe to settle in America?" At that time I already hated everything in Hungary, especially the omnipresent anti-Semitism. I assumed that my parents who went through all these horrors felt the same. But we stayed in Budapest. Luckily, 11 years later, I had a chance to flee to the West; fortunately, at that time I was accompanied by Marika.

***Gloomy and Dangerous Living in the
“People’s Democracy”: 1945-1956.***

A Brief Historical Background

After the end of World War II, our life in Hungary was extremely different from our pre-war existence. To comprehend our life in Budapest and the influence of frequently changing regimes on my upbringing, one needs to understand Hungarian history between 1945 and 1956. The brief review below includes my personal and highly subjective (possibly prejudiced) recollections. It perhaps differs from those written by historians.

Between 1945 and 1948 Hungary, for the first time in history, became a democratic republic ruled by a coalition government of five major political parties. The Communist Party was represented in the government. With the Soviets came a small but influential group of Communist functionaries who had been exiled to the Soviet Union following the failure of a brief Hungarian Communist revolution in 1919. On Stalin's order, many Communist exiles had been falsely accused of treason and hanged. Those who survived Soviet terror and returned to Hungary were nevertheless absolutely loyal to Stalin. In addition, there was a Social Democratic Party that espoused leftist policies as well. There were also other parties that had democratic ideas. Leaders of the Communist Party received orders from Stalin and were backed by the Soviet Army stationed in Hungary. When Hungary had free elections in 1947, the Communist Party received only 17% of the vote.

In 1949, with the help of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party took full control of the government. Hungary therefore came under the rule of a Stalinist group of leaders. Unfortunately, most of these very unpopular leaders were Jews, fueling the ever-present Hungarian anti-Semitism. These Stalinist leaders sought to transform Hungary into a Soviet satellite, copying the Soviet Union's political, cultural and economic policies, including "show trials". They transformed Hungary into a "People's Democracy," the

term for Eastern European countries under full Soviet control. A new, rigged election was held in 1949 and on that occasion, the Communist Party received over 90% of the vote.

After this election, the Communists established a total dictatorship under which any deviation from Stalinist doctrine was punishable by jail or even by death. It is hard to summarize all the strict new regulations the Communist government introduced. Some of the more important rules were: All businesses and factories were nationalized. Individual farmers were forced to give up their land and join socialist collective farming enterprises. Emigration was prohibited. Borders with democratic Western countries were secured by land mines and barbed wire. Possession of dollars or other Western currency was punishable by imprisonment. People were sentenced to long jail term for even minor offences such as reading Western publications, listening to Western radio broadcasts or telling liberal political jokes. Communist Party members “cadres” were placed as the heads of all institutions and businesses. These people were mostly unqualified for their positions and ruined the already fragile economy. Higher education was reserved for members of the working class. Newspapers and radio broadcasts became instruments of Communist propaganda. Cultural events had to comply with Communist doctrine. Even learning English was dangerous because doing so was considered to indicate admiration for Capitalism. In contrast, people had to demonstrate gratitude to and full support for the Communist regime by participating in cheerful demonstrations and hailing Communist Party leaders. To be absent from these demonstrations was punishable with job loss, expulsion from college and even jail sentences.

This dictatorship remained in power until 1953 when Stalin died; the political system subsequently became more moderate. Stalin’s inhuman despotism was publicly criticized by Khrushchev, the new leader of the Soviet Union. As a result, policies of the Hungarian Communists changed as well. Some degree of

liberalization took place. Premier Rákosi and the other Stalinist party leaders were removed from power, and replaced by a more liberal Communist Party led by Nagy Imre, a decent person who became Prime Minister.

Around 1955, the Soviet-dictated policy resorted to its old rigid Communist dictatorship. But it could not stop criticism of the system by liberal intellectuals. Dictatorship must be absolute to maintain the totalitarian system. Even allowing a little freedom of speech is likely to result in revolution. That happened in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and, finally, in 1989, within the Soviet Union itself.

By early 1956, discontent and pressure for further reform had grown in Hungary, as well as elsewhere in the Soviet bloc. The Hungarian Revolution erupted out of peaceful student demonstrations in Budapest on October 23, 1956. Hungarian students demonstrated against Soviet tyranny, and demanded more liberal policies and the withdrawal of the Soviet Army from Hungary. Hungarian secret police started to shoot into the peaceful demonstrators. At that point, most of the Hungarian Army joined the rebellion and the Soviet Army stationed in Hungary refused to fight the Hungarian people. The revolution was temporarily victorious. However, a major military operation with new Soviet troops was launched on November 4, 1956 and it eventually crushed the revolution. Within a few days Soviets and their Hungarian collaborators re-established full control over Hungary. During the 10 days of freedom, the Western borders were reopened and for a short period escape from Hungary, although dangerous, became possible. Hungarians began fleeing the country in early November. The exodus lasted until approximately the end of the year when border controls were reestablished. Over 200,000 mostly young refugees crossed Hungary's western border into Austria and from there moved to various democratic countries. About 40,000 of these refugees settled in the United States.

Our Family Struggled On

Before he returned from deportation, my father was assured by the American Camp authority that the cease-fire treaty with Hungary included a clause that all Jews must be compensated for material losses created by the Nazis. He came back confident that starting a new life would be simple. On the contrary, he never received a penny's worth of compensation from either the Hungarian or German governments. Although he was reinstated in his pre-war job, very severe inflation so reduced his income that it was insufficient to cover even the minimum of life's necessities. His situation was not unique. Most surviving Jews who returned after the War found that all their possessions had been ransacked by their neighbors and they had to rebuild from nothing. Some of them were entrepreneurs who were able to restore their well-being faster than people like my father. He had always felt secure with steady employment, not entrepreneurial endeavor. Others, the smart ones, just returned to the camps for the dispossessed in Germany. They eventually sailed to places like America, Canada or Australia to begin new lives. The more adventurous and mostly younger Jews like Eli, Marika's brother, immigrated to Israel on Exodus boats.

Our family was offered a miserable, mostly ruined, place to move into. Most housing in the Royal Palace compounds had been destroyed during the siege, including the house we had occupied before the War. We moved into similar housing near our original home. It was in a desirable location on the banks of the Danube, but a large section of the apartment was seriously damaged. Two large rooms had no ceiling. Only a former service room was livable. To get there we had to walk through a reception room inhabited by a woman who formerly worked for my father. Then we had to pass through the kitchen to get to the one undamaged room. I slept in the kitchen. Promises were made that the entire apartment would be repaired. The tenant relocated and eventually our family was promised that it would become the

single occupant of the three-bedroom apartment. For almost two years we waited for this to happen. Finally, my father gave up hope and we moved when Marta néni offered to share her large apartment in Teréz-körút. This was the same apartment where we had lived during the summer of 1944. As a single woman, the new regulations did not allow Marta néni to live alone in such a luxurious place. She preferred to share it with close relatives rather than with strangers. Decades later, this large apartment was divided into two individual units and my parents lived there during the remainder of their lives.

In 1945-46 my father had very little to do in his government job, and it did not seem likely that the Royal Gardens would be rebuilt in the foreseeable future. His income was insufficient, but he eventually found a more agreeable assignment. Many orphaned Jewish girls who survived the Holocaust were preparing to immigrate to Israel, where most likely, they would settle in a kibbutz doing agriculturally related work. These girls, in their late teens and early twenties, were city girls who had never been exposed to country life. My father was hired by JOINT (the Jewish Assistance Organization) to provide these girls with a basic understanding and practical knowledge of agriculture as preparation for beginning a new life in Israel while they were waiting to depart. My father had a highly rewarding experience teaching about 20-25 very intelligent girls. These orphaned girls treated him as a paternal figure, asking him advice on nonagricultural issues as well. Obviously, after surviving the Holocaust and losing their families, they had many emotional problems to deal with. Some of them visited us at home on Sundays and my father and I hiked with them in the hills of Buda. After about two years, they left for Israel on Exodus boats. Many of them sent us thank-you cards on their arrival but we never heard from them again.

Instead of the worthless inflationary Hungarian currency, JOINT compensated my father for his teaching activities with food

items and a daily lunch for the entire family.⁴ It was the first time I tasted canned peaches and I still loved the product many years later when I was working in a Californian cannery. At least during this period of food shortage, we had access to plenty of good food and, although the menu items were limited, we were much better nourished than most Hungarians.

In 1947 my father got tired of his poorly paid, idle position and accepted an offer to become an executive in the Department of Agriculture. Although he had a nice position, he missed direct daily contact with plants and nature. He was confined to an office job for the rest of his professional life and I believe that he was never happy again working in that environment.

In 1949 after the Communist Party take-over, even his nonpolitical position was threatened. Shortly after the takeover, his boss, the Undersecretary of Agriculture who was not a Communist Party member, was accused of treason and subjected to a “show trial” and found guilty. In the Communist system, anybody who was voluntarily or involuntarily associated with an accused politician became a suspect and was investigated by the secret police. My father was investigated, but fortunately not accused of any political crime. But shortly thereafter, he was removed from his position at the ministry.

He became the professional manager at a state-owned seed company. At that time, the top man in a State enterprise had to be a good Communist Party cadre, politically loyal to the regime but usually without any professional merit. So, a professional manager like my father officially reported to the Communist cadre, but actively made all the technical and business decisions. It's no wonder that under such an ineffective system, the country's economy was increasingly in decline. My father worked at the

4 Perhaps I am mentioning “*food*” too frequently. It illustrates that when one experiences starvation this subject is becoming a central issue occupying one's mind all the time.

seed company until his retirement at the age of 62. He remained active in his retirement, translating French technical literature and regularly helping a friend to raise vegetables and flowers in a small garden on the outskirts of the city.

In 1948, my father received an assignment that illustrates the futility of the Communist system. He was sent to Italy to purchase lemon tree stock for plant-breeding experiments in Hungary. He received this attractive assignment because, among the leading Hungarian horticultural experts, he was the only person who spoke a foreign language. He spoke good French, and it was assumed that this would be equally sufficient in Italy. He traveled all the way to Rome on government expense, which was a fantastic opportunity for him. In the meantime however, he worried because he realized that the project he was ordered to lead was doomed to failure. He knew that in the Communist system, somebody would be punished for a fiasco and that he could become the victim.

What was behind his assignment? The Communist doctrine was supposed to be valid for all technical fields including plant genetics. According to a theory of the glorified Russian plant-breeder, Michurin, juvenile plants could adapt to an unusual environment and the adapted character would be inherited by their progeny. Michurin demonstrated his theory by extending the apple-growing area in Russia by 300 kilometers to the North from the traditional area. The chief Hungarian Communist ideologue, Premier Rákosi, decided that this example could be applied to lemon-growing as well. Southern Hungary was also about 300 kilometers north of the Italian citrus-growing region. Thus, Rákosi declared that by applying the “superior” Russian plant-breeding principles, lemon-growing could be extended to Hungary. My father knew quite well that each Hungarian region was exposed to weeks of severe freezing weather and therefore, the subtropical lemon-plant would not survive in Hungary. But he was ordered to proceed, and it was dangerous to argue against

Communist doctrine. He purchased citrus plants in Italy and supervised the breeding program. Of course, it was a hopeless exercise and my father was afraid of the time when the program would be declared a failure. He could have been punished for sabotage and sentenced to prison. Fortunately the Communist Premier, Rákosi, was deposed before the failure of this venture was revealed.

The “lemon story” was immortalized in a Hungarian satirical movie “*Tanu*” (The Witness), a candid and realistic portrayal of the incompetent Communist regime. The movie takes place during the heights of the “Rákosi era”, which as noted was modeled after the ruthless Stalinist regime. In the script, people lived in such poverty that they could not even afford to purchase bread. Others raised pigs in secret in their home basements in order to avoid having to relinquish them to the collective farm. Concurrently, the Communist government was investing huge amounts of money in a lemon-breeding experiment. Finally, after many years of costly effort, one lemon was successfully harvested and the Communist Party held a great celebration hailing their superior plant breeding innovation.

My mother performed the role of a housewife for many years, but found that sharing a kitchen, bathroom etc. with Marta néni to be inconvenient. Finally, she decided to take a job and contribute to my father’s insufficient income. She, of course, had no professional training and ended up working as a clerk at the municipal water department. Her work was not too demanding, but she had to stay alone in the pumping station and work the night shift. During her entire life, she was afraid of many things and in this particular situation she was scared of remaining alone at the workplace. But she kept this job until her retirement at the age of 60. By that time, my parents were in a somewhat better situation financially, and so, in their retirement they could enjoy vacations at Lake Balaton and other Hungarian resorts.

By 1968, the Hungarian political system had liberalized somewhat and our entire family traveled to Budapest from California to visit our parents. During the next decade, we had several more occasions to visit them. In 1977, my father died of heart failure at the age of 74. After my father's death, my mother lived for five more years. Unfortunately, she could not adjust to her loneliness. She died at the age of 76 of general weakness.



Our First Family Reunion in Budapest May 1968,
From Left: My father, Öcsi, Peter, Bözsi mama, and George

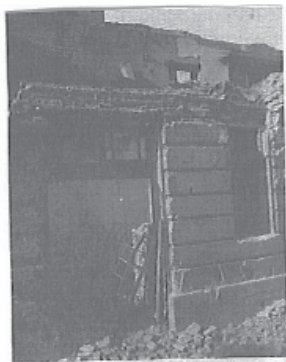


My Parents' Last Photo, 1976

*My Youth in Hungary:
1945-1956*

After my mother returned from deportation in September 1945, I could hardly wait to join them in Budapest. Finally, the four of us were together again and that compensated for all the difficulties we had suffered. I felt the joy of survival and the elation that the terror we had experienced would never return again. At the same time, this joy contrasted with deep mourning for the loss of those who made up our extended family and friends. We now lived temporarily in a half-ruined apartment, but I accepted it without complaint. After all, the entire city was in ruins. To be sure, the rubble was eventually cleared away, the stores reopened, the streetcars ran and the first temporary bridge over the Danube opened to traffic. But the damage caused by the war was extensive and long lasting. The bombed-out sites of large apartment houses, especially in Buda, became empty lots filled with weeds. Despite all of this, I still thought that Budapest was a beautiful city.

After arriving in Budapest, I returned to my old school. I found the building dilapidated, the result of many air strikes. Despite the damage, classes resumed, but only the ground floor of a formerly four-story building could be used. Therefore, we had short 30-minute classes and, to accommodate all students, we had rotating schedules between morning and afternoon lessons. Moreover, the coal needed for heating the classrooms was unavailable. Therefore, from mid-November through March, we had a long recess which we called “coal vacation.”



My High School Building before the War and its Entrance in Ruins after the Siege of Budapest

The gimnázium above was built in 1900. The school was named Werbőczy István Gimnázium. In 1945 the school was renamed Petőfi Sándor Gimnázium, after a revolutionary poet who died in 1849 during the war for Hungarian independence against the Austrian monarchy.

When I rejoined my class, I found that one-third of my pre-war classmates were missing. Many Jews and Christian classmates had died during the war. Others had moved to the West when the Soviet Army approached and never returned. Our class was joined by new boys from former military families. I hated them because most had been Nazi sympathizers and remained so even in the new era. Soon, however, I acquired new life-long friends. Cibi (Nobel Iván) who was a new member of our class. As a Jew, he had not been admitted to the gimnázium during the Nazi era. Despite his superior intellect, he had had to attend a trade school. In addition, with Fülöp Laci and Rápolthy Egon, we formed a close foursome joining together in all activities. In addition, we associated with some intellectual boys, like Domé Imre, Báthory Zoli and especially Tornai Pista. Tornai was an unlikely addition to my circle of friends. Before the war, he had attended a mili-

tary school and I avoided boys with that background for political reasons because most were still outspoken Nazis. During one of the long winter recesses as I was walking through a park, Tornai Pista was coming from the other direction still wearing his old military school uniform. I tried to avoid him and just pass by, but he simply blocked my way and insisted on shaking hands and we started a conversation. I was impressed both by his liberal views and by his other interests, which were similar to mine. Our life-long friendship started with that meeting.

Eventually he moved to the United States with his wife and three children and practiced medicine in New York City. Despite living far from each other, we had many occasions to see each other. Most of all, our extended families celebrated the new millennium together at an Arizona horse-ranch. After his retirement, he decided to move to California and he purchased a house near my son George. Unfortunately, he died of lung cancer before he made the move. His wife, Borika, lives there now. We have also known her since childhood, because she attended the same high school as Marika.

Returning to my life in 1946, we were still experiencing serious food shortages. Moreover, Hungary had severe inflation. We counted the *Pengő* (the Hungarian currency) by the billions. The currency devaluated so fast that by the time my father received his monthly salary it was worth perhaps the price of a dozen eggs. During the long winter recess, I moved to Klári néni's residence. She was an entrepreneur and produced Belgian waffles that were sold in delicatessen stores. She purchased ingredients paying with U.S. dollars or gold and also sold the finished products for these valuable currencies. I helped her in this activity while enjoying good meals and her hospitality. This meant that I was temporarily separated again from my family. Klári néni lived in Pest and crossing the Danube to the Buda side was a slow and difficult trip. Only one temporary bridge existed and it was closed when the river froze during the winter. I visited

my parents on Sundays and during the rest of the week did my chores for Klári néni. She was hoping to legally adopt me and it was a difficult moment when I had to tell her that that was out of question. Needless to say, during the long winter recess, I did not have much opportunity to study. Yet, I still finished my classes (equivalent to a U.S. 9th grader) in a shorter than usual time.

As the summer vacation approached, our lack of food was still a problem. My relatives in Baja invited me for the summer. One cousin of my mother's had returned from deportation, reestablished his flour mill and had plenty of food. I joined his family for the first half of the summer. Then, my uncle, Elemér bácsi, who at this time owned the alcohol factory established by my great-grandfather, invited me to live with them for the second half of the summer. Elemér bácsi played the viola in an amateur string quartet, and while living with them, I was exposed to great chamber music. His daughter, cousin Magda, loved musicians. From her early teens she had a series of lovers, all of whom were professional musicians, conductors, orchestra members, etc. Much later in Los Angeles, we were close friends with her ex-husband Szende Gyuri who was a member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra in the 1960s.

Actually, this was the last time my relatives in Baja enjoyed a prosperous life. In 1949, the Communist Party took over the government and established Soviet-style rules, which included nationalizing all private enterprise. After their factories and businesses were confiscated, these nice relatives had to cope with poverty.

I still remember one endearing story about Elemér bácsi. He liked the good things in life, especially American cigarettes, which were both expensive and rare in Hungary. He was in a hospital on his deathbed when my mother visited. As he looked up and recognized my mother, she told him that Lackó sends his best wishes to you from California. He answered in a weak

voice: "Please ask him to send me some Camel cigarettes."

The 1946/47 school year was even more difficult. The school was declared structurally dangerous and we attended 30-minute afternoon classes in another building. In the meantime, my parents decided to move to Teréz-körút, which was located in another school district. Attending my school required a long commute by streetcar. My father was trying to convince me to attend a nearby gimnázium instead. By that time, however, I had established good friendships in my class in Buda and refused to make the change.

About the same time, I started to experience severe aches in my right leg and received confusing diagnoses from different doctors. Some suggested that I had had polio during the siege that had been neglected. For years I had to take painkillers several times daily and woke up most nights with severe pain. My first reaction was to avoid walking and other exercise as much as possible. To avoid walking I took a streetcar even for one block. Many Hungarian doctors recommended water treatment for pain relief. One of my father's physician friends practiced in a still-existing luxurious health spa, the Gellért. The water there was regarded as therapeutic. The entrance fee at this exclusive spa would have been prohibitive, but Béla bácsi, the doctor friend, was chief physician there and he provided free passes for me. I received the water healing treatment, combined with sun lamp treatment, three times per week. I enjoyed the water cure but it made me tired and the sun lamp made me dizzy. So, after these treatments, I had to take a nap instead of doing homework. Also, an unpleasant supplementation to the cure was a painful vitamin B/C shot in my buttock. Actually none of these treatments and avoidance of exercise helped. I recovered years later by taking long bicycle trips with my friends. We rode as much as 60 miles between Budapest and Lake Balaton on bikes that did not have gearshifts. We therefore called them "two-speed" bikes. They could either go or stop.

At the beginning of the 1947/48 school year, our school building was sufficiently renovated to enable fully scheduled classes there. Finally, we returned to our own classroom and to regular morning schedules, which continued during my last two years of high school.

By that time, however, the Communist government had gained full power and life rapidly changed for the worse. Fear entered our daily lives again. People were arrested and sometimes disappeared as a result of false accusations. We were expected to praise the regime and Communist leaders constantly. We could get into trouble and even be arrested if we expressed opinions critical of the regime or just kept quiet. Also, we had to be constantly alert and not trust anyone. One example of this happened to my 18-year old friend living on the same floor where we lived. Even though she was a niece of the great poet József Attila, celebrated by the Communists as a socialist poet, she was arrested at a party because, in her presence, a joke was told about the bald head of the Communist Party chief. Somebody reported the incident and everybody at the party was taken to jail and held without trial for years.



“Gellért Fürdő”, my Therapeutic Pool during 1946-1947

Life under Communism proved a great disappointment, all the more so, considering the gratitude I had felt initially to the Soviets for liberating my family from the Nazis. Gradually, however, I realized that instead of the immediate threat of death that surrounded us during the Nazi era, under Communist rule I was facing the slow agony of inevitable demise. Also, I had the renewed predicament of being an undesirable person because my

father was from the educated middle-class and I therefore did not belong to the worker's class. This led me, as well as my close friends, to look for an escape from dealing with this cruel and hopeless reality. Fortunately, in Budapest opportunities existed to do so by taking part in intellectual activities and avoiding political ties as much as possible.

We were greatly inspired by one of our teachers, Dr Grexa Gyula. Under more normal conditions he would have been a university professor, but in 1919 he had participated in the democratic (as opposed to the Communist) revolution. After the Horthy regime took over, he was punished for his previous political involvement and fired from his position as the Chief Librarian of the National Museum, thus becoming a high school teacher. Gyula bácsi was a highly unconventional teacher. His main purpose was to encourage us to listen to classical music, to see the world and to read good literature. Before World War II, he had traveled frequently by train throughout Europe as far as he could go. His vivid descriptions of monuments and museums in Italy, France and Spain—places that we could not even hope to visit at that time—initiated our life-long desire of becoming world travelers. He used to walk between the aisles during his lectures. If he spotted a student reading a book under the table, he grabbed the book to read the title. If he found the book objectionable, he dropped it into the garbage. If he approved, he stroked the head of the student and returned the book. Also, he invited us to his home to hear opera records. One of his former students sent him an LP player along with many operatic recordings from America. Another former student, a customs officer, allowed delivery of this gift to him without charging any duty fees. This LP player was the sole apparatus of its type at that time in Budapest. Even one of the most celebrated Hungarian opera stars, Székely Mihály, came to listen to his LP recording on Gyula bácsi's player. (For the initiated reader, the LP recording in question was a live Metropolitan Opera performance of *Simon Boccanegra* with Székely, Leonard Warren, Richard Tucker and Astrid Varnay.)

A year after our graduation, Gyula bácsi was forced into early retirement because a group of students had recited a religious prayer one day before his class began. This was a serious offense under the Communist system. Gyula bácsi did not stop the prayer, someone reported it to the Communist Party and as punishment he was banned from teaching. When we heard that he was facing serious poverty, we suggested that he play recordings from his huge collection for interested people and charge an entry fee. He followed our advice. His operatic evenings became a great success and provided an income for him. At the beginning, some of our former classmates uninterested in opera attended just to pay the entrance fee and then sneak out even before the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* was finished. The news spread and soon Gyula bácsi's LP performances became a popular meeting place for the enjoyment of many opera lovers. Even leading singers of the Hungarian Opera Company attended Gyula bácsi's LP evenings, which were held three times weekly.

Attending live performances at the Budapest Opera became my great pastime. The company had a large repertoire, with seven performances a week from September through June. I could afford tickets only on the far edge of the third-level balcony, where much of the stage action could not be seen. Among the wide repertoire, I favored about 25 productions that represented my musical taste at the time. I saw these operas on numerous occasions. For example, between 1948 and 1956, I saw *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* 28 times. All performances were performed in Hungarian while foreign guest singers sang in the original language of the piece. This often created funny moments in dialogues, especially during the fast recitatives in Mozart Operas. A record for mixed languages was set with an *Aida* performance in which the great Russian baritone Pavel Lisitsian sang in Russian, the guest soprano in Italian and the remaining cast in Hungarian.

One of the great conductors of the era, Otto Klemperer, was

invited as guest conductor. His performances were the sensation of the city. The impact of his conducting was phenomenal. Until then, I had not heard most the operatic masterpieces even on the radio or on recordings. Hearing *Don Giovanni*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Fidelio*, *Lohengrin* and many other masterpieces for the first time with Klemperer remains among my most cherished memories. Klemperer stayed in Budapest for three seasons and frequently conducted about 15 productions of Mozart, Wagner, Verdi, Beethoven, Strauss etc. I saw all of them several times. I was also very fortunate to hear many of Klemperer's symphonic concerts, including a series of all the Beethoven symphonies, overtures, and piano and violin concertos—most of which I heard for the first time under his direction.

Ticket prices for the opera were inexpensive and performances sold out quickly. To purchase the least expensive tickets, I had to stand in line from Saturday evening until 10 AM Sunday morning. This was when the box office opened and started to sell advance tickets for the following week. It was an unpleasant task, particularly in winter. Exceptions were when a famous guest artist came to perform. On those occasions, ticket prices were increased three-fold.

One experience illustrates my mother's unusual goodness, which all my friends admired. She never attended the opera because she had no appreciation for classical music. I mentioned that a famous Viennese singer would appear in a Wagnerian role but that I could not afford the high ticket price for that performance. At the time we still had food shortages. She sold some potatoes, which my father had brought from the country, and gave me the money to purchase the opera ticket.

After a while, I noticed that some young people frequently attended performances by sitting on the steps at mid-balcony, which provided a very good view of the entire stage. Talking to one of the boys, I found out that they came from one of the

dormitories established for good cadres of the Communist Party, called People's Colleges" ("népi collégium"). Everybody feared these young Communist cadres. One of them told me that they would simply identify themselves to the head usher as members of the People's College and he would issue free passes.

My friend Fülöp, a talented graphic artist, then forged People's College student IDs so we could request free passes at the opera. For those readers who may be appalled at this fraud, please remember that these fake IDs were produced only a couple of years after the Holocaust when forged ID papers were treasured because they often saved lives. Therefore we had no understanding that forging papers to cheat authorities was a crime in normal times. Fülöp forged perfect IDs that identified us as resident students of "Madarász László People's Collegium". Such an institution of course never existed, but it sounded like a name of a communist hero. We made up the name and the trick worked very well. The head usher treated us with respect or fear and for years he issued us free passes every time we wanted to attend a performance. Moreover, I did not have to spend any further Saturday nights at the ticket line. I became a very enthusiastic opera-lover, and with free passes, if I had had my way, I would probably have attended a performance every night. However, my parents were not interested in opera. Their appreciation of "serious" music consisted of Viennese operetta by Franz Lehár or Johann Strauss. Naturally, they wanted me to devote more time to my studies, so, they allowed me to attend only one opera performance per week—maybe twice, if there were particularly interesting events. But, I was able to partially break this rule. My parents went to sleep no later than 9 o'clock. We lived a 10-minute walking distance from the Opera House. Therefore, after my parents retired, I frequently sneaked out of the apartment to hear the third act of a performance.

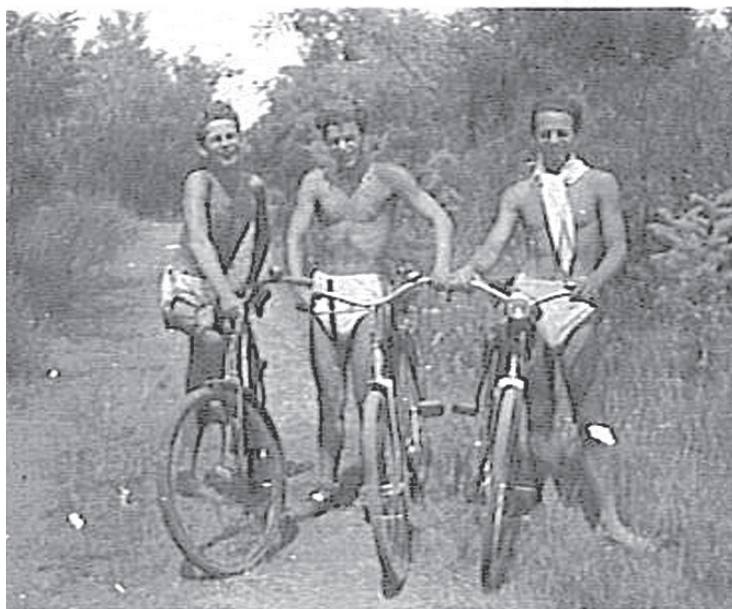
Just one related story about the Madarász László Collegium. We traveled to Budapest in 1976. My son, Peter was already interested

in opera, but tickets were sold out for all performances during our stay. He and I were sadly reading posters at the front of the Opera House. Suddenly, my childhood friend Makai Péter recognized me on the street. In our youth, he often joined me at the Opera House as a member of the Madarász László Collegium. Since that time, he had become a resident stage director and scenery designer at the Opera House. Following our enthusiastic reunion, I asked him, “Is it possible that I cannot get any tickets for tonight’s performance?” His instant answer was: “Well, today you won’t be able to attend as member of Madarász László Collegium, but I will arrange some good seats for you.” Indeed from box seats, we attended a performance of *Elektra*, performed with the sets designed by my good old friend Makai Péter.

Attending musical performances provided a great escape from day-to-day reality, which was increasingly controlled by the Communist regime. Other escapes included going to the theatre. Many classical plays were performed. I became familiar with the plays of Shakespeare, Molière, Schiller, etc. But most of all we read a lot of good literature. To converse in the cultured circles in Budapest one had to have read works by Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, G.B. Shaw, Marcel Proust, Honoré de Balzac, etc. Also, familiarity with great Hungarian poets, novelists, and, most importantly, delivering excerpts from the satires of Karinthy Frigyes, Rejtő Jenő (who wrote under the pseudonym of P. Howard) and from Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Schweik* were essential.

My friends and I took bicycle tours every summer. We biked as far as Lake Balaton, about 70 miles from Budapest. I believe that this exercise cured my knee. We camped out for weeks in the garden of my friend Domé Imre whose family owned a vacation home there. During the day, we enjoyed the lake. After drinking some wine in the evenings, we performed our own funny scripts, providing entertainment for the neighborhood. These summer excursions were annual events for five years until we

could afford to vacation in proper rented housing.



Biking to Lake Balaton with Cibi and Pista, 1949



**Waking up with hangover at our campsite at Lake Balaton,
From left: Tornai Pista, myself and Cibi.**

Starting in 1949, constant fear became again part of our existence. In school we were required to join the Communist youth movement. My friends and I joined, but usually did not participate in the meetings. One mandatory annual ritual was taking part in the May 1st parade. Carrying red flags and signs with communist slogans was essential in these spectacles. All factory workers, office employees, and students were required to march in front of a stand occupied by waving Communist Party leaders. We had to wait for hours for our turn in an assembly place. Usually I managed to disappear from the marching line and never make it to the party leader's platform. Of course, to avoid the attention of the officials after I had left my group I had to somehow dispose of the sign I was carrying. My best technique was walking into a public toilet and leaving my sign there. My friend Egon once carried a red flag all the way home, and asked his mother to make swimming trunks from the flag material. These are just a few illustrations of how we had some fun even in the dismal situations forced on us by the Communist government.



May 1 Parade, 1950 - I am marching on the far right; on this occasion my early escape was impossible because I had to push a sack of seeds

My friend Horvath Adam is in the middle; after the dissolution of the Communist regime he became Music Director of Hungarian Radio and Television.

For a 16-17 year old boy, finding a girlfriend became a central issue. Some of my friends already had “permanent” relationships and I envied them. For a start, I had a crush on Ninon. Conveniently, she lived on the same floor as we did in Teréz-körút. She was a very intelligent, and attractive girl. Her mother was the box office manager at one of the major movie theatres.

Through her connections, Ninon could get free admittance to every movie theatre in Budapest and she frequently invited me to join her at the movies. However, she did not return my attraction and we remained only good friends.

In fact, I still hold it against Ninon that she told me we would only remain friends while we were walking to a concert. During the Communist regime, artists from the West came very rarely to Budapest. I had long anticipated the opportunity to hear Yehudi Menuhin, a world-renowned violinist, who was playing three concerti. Needless to say, after this gloomy preconcert talk I did not enjoy his great performance.

Schools were segregated by gender. The only joint program consisted of dancing lessons, held at the girls' school. My friends and I felt that it was not an intellectual activity and decided that we were not going to participate. But my mother insisted that I enroll in a session. She thought that ballroom dancing was a nice activity for a young boy. Despite my close friends' disapproval, I followed my mother's request. Actually I enjoyed the opportunity to meet nice girls in a setting where I did not have to initiate the meeting. I immediately noticed the presence of the most beautiful girl in the group. Her name was **Harmat Marika**. We frequently danced together and engaged in some small talk, but I was too timid to suggest a date with one of the most popular girls in the class. Later, we frequently passed each other in the street and engaged in small talk. Classes in the boys' gimnázium ended 10 minutes before the girls' final class. This gave the boys an opportunity to walk by the girls' school and meet them by "coincidence". Marika and I did not discuss religion because it was unimportant at the time. However, at one meeting I noticed with horror that there were small blue numbers on her lower arm, resembling the tattoos Jews were marked with in concentration camps. Assuming she was a Holocaust survivor I was shaken, but did not ask any questions and was glad to realize she was Jewish. Later I found out that those numbers were

not marks related to the Germans. She had a math exam and had drawn a “cheat sheet” on her arm to provide correct answers.

About one year later, our school organized a Saturday evening dance. By this time, such events had become dominated by the Communist agenda, with the students singing socialist songs, and performing Russian folk dances and propaganda plays. My friends and I always ignored such Communist-dominated entertainment. But we developed a reputation for entertaining our class with funny scripts. Therefore at this time, the Communist organizer approached Cibi, Egon and me to perform one of our funny skits/⁵ at an event involving stage performances followed by ballroom dancing. We could not turn down this request because it was more of an order than a friendly invitation. Among my friends, we agreed that immediately following our stage appearance we would leave the event.

As we arrived that evening, I noticed that Marika was among the audience. I even had a few words with her before the event started. We did our show and I decided to break the agreement with my friends and stay for the dance. I anticipated that perhaps I could have a few turns on the floor with Marika. As it happened, we danced together almost the entire evening. Our conversation included opera and she told me that she attended some performances with her aunt and she loved listening to opera and classical music. This encouraged me to ask her if she would join me at an opera performance. Her answer was “yes” (I hope now 65 years later she still does not regret it), but told me that she needed the approval of her father who would arrive later in the evening to take her home. She suggested that I introduce myself to him and ask his permission for us to go together to the Opera. I was really scared. To summon courage, I ordered two shots of rum at the bar. (Imagine: liquor was legally served at high school dances in Hungary.) Jenő papa arrived, holding up

5 “Tegezés” by Karinthy Frigyes, our favorite humorist.

Marika's overcoat as a reminder to leave. I asked his permission to invite Marika to the opera, and he agreed. Soon, I paid a visit to meet her mother as well. On my first visit I borrowed a suit from Cibi because I felt that mine was not good enough for the occasion.

Before long, Marika and I attended our first opera performance, *Boris Godunov*, one of the prime productions at the Budapest Opera. On this first occasion, I purchased tickets. Later I told her about our scheme and she came along as a member of Madarász László People's Collegium. I still cherish the poster of the first performance we attended together on November 28, 1948. It is shown below. This was the initiation of our friendship; followed by marriage, emigration, children, grandchildren and *il resto nol dico* (as Mozart's Figaro says).

Vasárnap, 1948 november 28-án

Bérletszünet. MUSZORGSZKY M. Rendes helyárak.

BORIS GODUNOV

Dalmű 3 felvonásban, 8 képben. Szövegét írták Puskin és Karamzsin.
Hangszerelte Rjmsky-Korzakov N. Fordította Nádasy Kálmán.
Vezényli Ferencsik János. Rendezte Oláh Gusztáv és Nádasy Kálmán.

Boris Godunov	... Székely Mihály	Varlam } szökött	Fodor János
Feodor } gyermekel	Neményi Lili	Missail } szerzetesek	Somló József
Xenia } ...	Mátyás Mária	A kocsmárosné	Virág Ilona
Az öreg dajka	... Németh Anna	A falu bolondja	... Fekete Pál
Szujszkij herceg	... Rösler Endre	A határőrség egy	
Cselkalov, a duma		tisztje	... Bencze Miklós
... titkára	Reményi Sándor	Udvari bojár	... Somogyvári Lajos
Pimen, öreg szerzetes		Krucsov bojár	... Toronyi Gyula
... krónikafő	Kálmán Oszkár	Leviczky	... Tóth Lajos
Dimlitri trónkövetelő		Csernyakovszky	... Rissai Pál
(szerzetes nevén		Mityu	... Molnár László
Grigorij)	Nagypál László	I. } parasztasszony	Cseh Márta
Marina, a szandomiri		II. } ...	Szatmáry Aranka
vojvoda leánya	Szilvássy Margit	Egy paraszt	... Köles Zoltán
Várnagy	Bencze Miklós		

Karigazgató Pless László.

A díszleteket Oláh Gusztáv és Fülöp Zoltán, a jelmezeket Márk Tivadar tervezte.

I. felvonás 1. kép: A Szent Szűz kolostor Mozkvában. 2. kép: A Szent Csoda kolostor cellája. 3. kép: A Kreml főtere. Idő: 1593. II. felvonás 1. kép: Kocsma a litván határon. 2. kép: A cár szobája a Kremlben. 3. kép: A szandomiri vajda palotája előtt. Lengyelországban. III. felvonás 1. kép: Tisztás, Kíromy mellett. 2. kép: Trónterem a Kremlben. Idő: 1605

Kezdeté 6 órakor, vége 10 óra után

Hungarian Opera House Poster
Showing the first performance I attended with Marika.

In retrospect, my outlook on life changed completely at this date. Instead of considering myself a failure, I became content with an optimistic outlook. Even my nickname of “*kripli*” (a sort of nebbish in Hungarian) that an unfriendly classmate used to call me no longer bothered me. After this date, we regularly attended opera, concerts, and theater and spent most of our free time together. She became close to my friends as well. She introduced her best friend Panni to Cibi and they got married. Marika even learned bicycling to be able to join our group on local tours.

We attended opera and theater performances at least once or twice a week. One obstacle was that she lived in Buda and I lived on the Pest side of Budapest. All cultural activity at that time happened on the Pest side. Some of the opera performances ended close to midnight. We could take the special late-night bus connection from the Opera to Buda, but I had limited choices for returning home. My options were either to take a cab, which I could not afford; walking home, which was a long distance (and in the winter rather unpleasant); or sleeping at Cibi’s who lived near Marika. Of course, letting Marika go home alone was not an option. When Marika arrived home late, her mother would prepare some cold dinner, which frequently included yogurt. Marika would never touch it, but I liked yogurt. To please both her mother and me, she lowered the yogurt and a spoon on a long string from her third floor window. After I ate it on the street, she pulled back the empty bottle. Saving the empty glass bottle was important, because they could be returned to the store for a refund and Bözsi mama would never have ignored that opportunity.

Until I started dating Marika, I had usually arrived at school on time. My route to school changed, however, as I added an extra loop to my route to meet her before school at a station where she had to switch streetcars. She usually arrived at the last minute. My school was a bit further than hers so I was late almost every day. When I entered late in my classroom, all my classmates

whispered with approval (or envy) “Once again he was waiting for Harmat.”

1948/1949 was a difficult school year because we were preparing for high school graduation. We had to take an oral examination that covered all the materials we had learned during the previous eight years. Traditionally, the grades for these high school finals had served as the basis for University admission. In the Communist era, however, only a very few middle class students were admitted to universities because higher education had become a privilege reserved for the children of factory workers and peasants. I was hoping that my good grades would still be enough to break this barrier. I was wrong. After taking entrance examinations at three medical schools, I was rejected by all of them. The same fate awaited my close friends—except for Tornai Pista, who had wanted to study literature but was admitted to medical school instead. Failing admission to the university was a great disappointment. In desperation, we all got very drunk when we learned of the rejection.

I still enjoyed my last long summer vacation because I spent most of my time with Marika in the swimming pool, taking bike trips and spending most evenings attending outdoor concerts. It was only at the beginning of the fall that I started to worry about my immediate future and began trying to figure out what to do under these depressing circumstances.



First photo with Marika, 1949; obviously a happy one.

In September I started looking for a job. After all, I wanted at least to earn some money. Cibi, Fülöp and I decided to stick together and assumed that if we did physical work at a place favored by the Communist Party it might help to eventually get us accepted at the University. A new office building was under construction for *Szabad Nép* the official newspaper of the Communist Party. The three of us applied for a job there and we were hired as laborers. Becoming unskilled construction workers wasn't exactly what we had been dreaming about. Nor had we foreseen how hard it would be to carry bricks to the roof eight hours a day. We were so exhausted by the end of the day that even the foreman felt sorry for us, and after a few days Cibi and I were transferred to different work where we sat pulling nails out from old wooden floor blocks so they could be recycled in the new office building. Fülöp's drawing skills were revealed and he was assigned to a desk job in the architect's office. He worked

there until he was admitted to the architecture faculty of the University. He had to compromise as well, because he had wanted to study at the art school to become a painter. Together with Cibi, I pulled nails all day for a few weeks, and then we decided to quit. From that time on I never again had a chance to work alongside my close friends. But we still met regularly in our free time and continued with our favorite activities. Actually, as the Communist system became more tolerant in 1953, all my friends began University studies and ultimately achieved distinction in their particular fields. They were outstanding individuals who were able to succeed even under a harsh political system.

On the first anniversary of our high school graduation, we made a stupid and potentially very dangerous mistake. About 12 of us former classmates held a Saturday night celebration in a pub. We were in a happy frame of mind after drinking all evening and somebody suggested we visit the old school building. We found our former first floor classroom window open and climbed in to continue our party. Under Communist rule classrooms had to be decorated with slogans, red-stars, pictures of Stalin and the Party leadership. This obviously annoyed us and we removed most of these from the walls and destroyed them. Soon we heard police sirens and quickly fled to hide in the adjacent park. The police did not know how many or what kind of people they would have to deal with, so a large force arrived and surrounded the park. Soon we were arrested, except one of us who managed to escape. We were jailed at the district police station. The classmate who escaped acted quickly. Because he had known most of our parents since first grade, he immediately called them to tell what had happened. In Budapest, most people still had influential connections even under the Communist era. Indeed, one father knew the police chief on duty socially and contacted him. At that time, there were two different types of police branches. One was the old nonpolitical force handling traffic, small theft etc. The other was the feared political police who tortured political prisoners in order to extract confessions for use in the

infamous show trials against “enemies of the people.” We had been arrested by the regular police and the friendly chief agreed to prepare a report minimizing our crime. Most importantly, he did not indicate that we had destroyed political decorations. But he had to obey regulations and send his report over to the political police for review. He said that if the political police wanted to press the case, he would be unable to help. We were scared, knowing that if the political police wanted us to admit to treason, we would be tortured until we did so. We awaited our verdict in jail. Fortunately the political police were not interested in dealing with us so we were released with a “don’t do it again” warning. Later, we met the school custodian who remembered us. He even apologized, saying he would not have called the police if he had known that former students were involved, but he feared that dangerous criminals had broken in.

In September, my father decided to contact old colleagues to find a job for me. Immediately through one of his contacts, I was hired by a seed company. I was assigned a position as a warehouse administrator. It was a boring job, but for the first time I received a salary, at entry level, of course.

At the same time, Marika changed schools. She was admitted to art school, where she received a high school education as well as special art classes. To do so, she had to attend classes from morning until late afternoon. I worked 48 hours a week (including Saturdays) and sometimes was required to work overtime as well. Therefore, our time together was spent mainly on the Sundays and some evenings, when we could attend musical or theater performances. At least now I could afford to take Marika out for a small dinner or a good pastry shop for dessert after a performance. Also, with my first paycheck I purchased a good bike to replace the one taken by the Nazis.

In May 1950 our life was suddenly interrupted with a very serious crisis. Marika called me sobbing that her father had been

arrested and jailed during the night. Before Communist rule, Jenő papa had held a high government job. After the Communist takeover, he was indicted for political crimes, namely, that he had sabotaged the economy, thus harming the people's democracy. Of course he was innocent, as were many of the innocent victims the Communists had put in prison. The political police came in the middle of the night to arrest him, and his trial was scheduled shortly. Eventually, he was sentenced to three years of forced labor. Besides their anguish over Jenő papa's suffering, Marika and her mother had no income. Bözsi mama had never had to work before. But she was very resilient and purchased a machine to produce and sell hand-made stockings. She had to work long hours each day to make a living and Marika helped her by doing the finishing work on the stockings in the evenings after school. I came over every day after work to be with her. Her task was routine and we could have good conversations while she worked. My office was at the other end of the city. I mostly biked to her house to Buda, and then returned to my home in Pest. As a summer break, Marika, my mother, Pista and Borika, his girl friend and future wife, and I traveled by train for a camping vacation at Lake Balaton.

In the spring of 1951, we were hit again by another serious crisis. The Communists started to remove families from Budapest that they regarded as bourgeois and therefore enemies of the system. These families were given a half-day's notice to pack their essential belongings and were then transported to distant villages. There, they were forced to do agricultural work such as planting rice. I witnessed some of these forced relocations, which happened to former classmates and colleagues from work.

Soon, the news spread that political prisoner's families would be deported as well. We were scared because we realized that Bözsi mama and Marika could be deported. My family was safe from this threat because my father was a member of the Communist Party (originally he was a member of the social democratic party

because when he worked in the Ministry of Agriculture he had to choose a party affiliation. In 1949 the social democratic party was forced to unite with the communist party. Resigning from the party membership at that time could result in punishment). To save Marika from potential deportation, I proposed that we get married. She could reside in my parents' apartment and be protected as a member of our family. In that way, she could continue with her studies and, if her mother were deported, we could help her.

Marika and Bözsi mama, as well as my parents, agreed to the plan. However, we could not possibly involve Jenő papa in the decision making, because he received mail only once a month and it was censored. Four days later, on June 1, 1951, my 20th birthday, Marika and I were married—certainly I had had a great birthday present. Our marriage ceremony was simple; Bözsi mama, my parents, Öcsi, Marika's aunt Katus, and my friends attended. The next day, Marika went back to school and I returned to work. Although married girls were not permitted to attend public school, Marika privately told her principal teacher what happened. In art school, teachers were quite permissive about such matters. She finished art school without it being officially known that she was a married woman.

The interesting sideline of the official wedding process was that my friends Egon, Cibi and Pista also got married within 3 weeks, albeit for different reasons. All our marriages took place in the front of the same judge, and we were witnesses for each other on the four successive occasions; one couple was in the middle to take the marital oath surrounded by the other couples. The judge was mystified seeing the same four couples every time standing in front of him, one couple getting married and the others acting as witnesses.

A few weeks later we had our honeymoon in Balatonlelle. We spent it with Borika and Pista. As a wedding present, they had

been given the use of a nice and spacious weekend house and they invited us to join them. Bread and other essential food items were still in short supply. Fortunately, there was an apricot tree in the garden that turned out to be our primary source of nourishment; first the fruit itself and then the seeds, which tasted like almonds.



Just Married, 1951

I did not have to wait long for the next problem to arise. Hungary required three years of mandatory military service, an event most of us wished to avoid. The service started each year on October 1 for all men who had become 20 years old. I

was hoping to have a medical discharge, given my leg problem. Unfortunately, I was found to be fully able to serve as a result of the medical exam held earlier in August. The other possibility for minimizing service was to enroll in college, with weekly military training received there (similar to the ROTC program in America, except in Hungary the training was mandatory). One month's active duty during the summer vacation followed, with three months of service after graduation and upon completion of these training requirements, one became a second lieutenant. I chose this option, and using some of my connections among orchestra members, I was almost admitted as an oboe student at the Academy. The professor accepted me, but to have an official certificate acceptable for military deferment, I needed a signature from the director of the Institute. Unfortunately the director Maestro Sándor Frigyes was on a guest conducting tour in the Soviet Union. He was supposed to return before my deadline, but his concerts were so successful that his tour was extended beyond October 1. If I had been inducted, there would have been no way to be released. I was in a desperate mood. On September 28 during my weekly dinner with my parents, my father casually mentioned that an old friend of his had been named as the new dean of the Agricultural Science University. This was news because such a high position was usually filled with a good Communist Party member and he was not one of those. At this point my mind moved quickly. I asked my father if he would call him next morning to inquire if I could be admitted as a student among the small quota for descendants of a "middle class" family. The next day, my father said that I should see Dean Probocskai Endre immediately. With his help two days before the military induction deadline, I was admitted to the University and received my deferment. Although the subject of my major study was not my choice, I decided that I would prefer to have a college degree in four years rather than wasting three years of my life by serving in the Red Army.

Actually the years were not wasted. During the first two years,

we studied basic science such as chemistry, physics, bacteriology, statistics, etc. and specifically focused on horticulture during the last two years. Having a Hungarian diploma turned out to be a great asset later on. My Hungarian B.S. degree was accepted in the United States and I was able to enter a graduate study program to earn my master's and doctorate degrees.

During the next four and a half years, I was a university student, and Marika attended art school for two more years. I received a small scholarship, but our finances were insufficient for independent living. Therefore, for two years we lived separately with our parents. After Marika graduated and started to work, we both lived with her parents because there was a housing shortage in Budapest and we could not afford to rent or purchase our own apartment. It was rather common in Budapest for several generations of one family to share living quarters.

By 1953, the Communist system had become a bit more liberal and Jenő papa received amnesty. When he was free, he finally learned that his little daughter had been married for two years. He graciously accepted the new family ties and the four of us shared their apartment amicably.

At the University we had large classes of about 120 students. They were mostly Communist cadres brought in and supported by the Communist Party. I had to be very careful because I was surrounded by Communist classmates who were hostile toward me because I came from a "bourgeois" background. Actually, some anti-Communist classmates accused of political crimes disappeared and no one dared to ask what had happened to them. By this time I was expert in identifying classmates who shared my hatred of the Communist system and therefore found a few trusted friends.

I became a very good student for several reasons: First of all, I had the advantage of a better foundation in high school sci-

ence training than most of the party-sponsored students, some of whom would never have made it without the sponsorship of the Communist Party. Also, a defense against expulsion was to maintain high academic grades. Additionally, with good grades I was able to receive financial aid. But most of all, several of my professors were old friends of my father and had known me from early childhood. Therefore I owed it to them to be a good student.

In the meantime, Marika and I continued our social life, participated in the rich cultural activities in Budapest by regularly attending our favorite musical and theatre performances. Also, we went walking in the beautiful hills of Buda, swam in the attractive public pools, and partied with our old friends. In fact, I enjoyed considerable free time as a student, because, although the Hungarian university system requires an oral examination at the end of each semester, no exams were taking place during the school year. Incidentally, all my close high school friends entered one college or another to avoid military service.

Summer vacations were short because I had to do a month of active military service. Soldiering was brutal in the beginning, just like boot camp training everywhere. I served in the artillery, learning to shoot with outdated guns supplied by the Red Army. My imitations of the officers were entertaining to my friends, but did not enhance my military career. My Communist classmates had absolutely no sense of humor and reported any funny incidents as treason. Yet, I successfully completed my military training and received an officer's rank only two days before the Revolution. Therefore, I never had the chance to wear the officer's uniform. However, with my title as second lieutenant, I attained the highest military rank of any member of my family.



Military Service in Soviet Style, 1952
I am in top row second from right

After completing four years of university study, we had to take part in a six-month work program before receiving the diploma. I did not particularly like physical farm work and managed to find a less strenuous office assignment creating a plan for the use of a large greenhouse complex to be constructed at the University's experiment station. I had to present my diploma work to a professorial committee. The examination was open to the public, and Marika, my father, Jenő papa and several of my friends came to see my presentation. My work was praised by the experts and, when the complex was built various parts of my strategy were implemented. However, I never had a chance to see it. (I did not expect at the time that my next oral presentation in Hungarian would not take place until 46 years later as part of my consulting assignment).

With a diploma in hand, the next challenge was to find employment in Budapest. Under the Communist system, we paid no

tuition to the University and even received financial aid during our enrollment. But after graduation, it was the State who decided where one could work. Thus very little, if any, flexibility existed. In my area of expertise, most positions were in rural farming towns, but I could not imagine settling and working in such places. Fortunately, through my father's connections, I received a job offer in Budapest. All flower shops in Budapest, called "Virágért", were state-owned and run from a central office. My role was to manage some 85 flower shops, all located in the city. It was a comfortable enough job, with considerable flexibility regarding my schedule and an office in the center of Budapest, but it was not stimulating professionally. As it turned out, this career was very short.

Fight for Freedom:
October 23 – November 4, 1956

October 23, 1956 was a day like 9/11. I have vivid memories of every minute of that historic day. Memorial Day in Hungary is November 1, the busiest day of the year in the flower business. As I was going to inspect the flower stand near the main cemetery, I received a call from a university student. He asked if I could arrange a nice wreath for the student union. They wanted to honor General Bem, a Polish officer who in 1848 led the Hungarian Army against the Russians. They wanted to place the wreath at his memorial sculpture. I promised to send it to them free of charge—of course it would be financed by state money. I did not realize the consequences that would result from sending those flowers. Holding the memorial service at the Bem statue proved to be a cover for organizing a political demonstration against Communism and specifically the Soviet domination of Hungary. The marchers attracted an immense student crowd and were soon joined by workers and other citizens. A loud demonstration against the Soviets and the puppet Hungarian government ensued. The Soviet-style emblem was cut out from the middle of Hungarian flags. At the front of the statue, political speeches were delivered against the government. As for my donated wreath, it was carried in the front line of the demonstration and appeared on many foreign newsreels in which I could view it over the next 25 years. On each October 23, the evening TV news memorialized the anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution and played the newsreel showing the demonstrators carrying that wreath.

Early that afternoon, I attended a French film with Marika. As we came out of the show, we saw a large crowd surrounding a poster. Most onlookers expressed joy while others had somewhat puzzled expressions. The excitement was about the 12-point, antigovernment demands posted by the student union of

the University, a very dangerous protest in a dictatorship. The demands included some incredible aims, such as withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and quitting membership in the Warsaw Pact treaty (the Communist version of NATO led by the Soviet Union).

As we arrived home telling the incredible news to Jenő papa, the radio was broadcasting a speech of Communist Party boss Gerő Ernő that served to light the fuse of revolution. In his broadcast, Gerő accused the demonstrators of being “fascist provocateurs.” Surging toward Radio Budapest, the crowd demanded the right to be heard and put the 10-point demands on the air. The security police fired machine guns into the crowd and the Revolution had begun, started by young people searching for freedom. By next morning, the regular Hungarian Army, as well as the workers, had joined the Revolution. The Army provided guns for the students and workers. The Hungarian Revolution set off the eventual transformation of political affairs in all Soviet-dominated countries.

During the night, we could hear gunshots. The next morning, our neighborhood in Buda was quiet, but we heard via the radio that schools, workplaces and stores were closed in the City. We decided to see what was happening on the Pest side. Because public transport was not running, we walked over the bridge toward the center of the City. Russian tanks were standing at important intersections, with some of them charred from burning. Tanks had not proved very effective in street combat, and revolutionary fighters had discovered they were vulnerable if “Molotov cocktail”, bottles filled with gasoline and ignited, were thrown at them.

Many people were marching toward Parliament demanding the resignation of the Communist government. We started to march as well, but, as we approached the main avenue leading toward Parliament Square, I suddenly had a bad feeling. I pulled Marika

away from the marching column although she wanted to proceed. We were not very far away when we heard an incredible series of machine gun shots lasting for an hour. We saw many people running from the direction of the Parliament building. As we learned later, the bloodiest massacre took place there. As the demonstrators were demanding political changes in Parliament Square, the Hungarian secret police started indiscriminately shooting into the crowd from the roofs of surrounding government buildings. There were thousands of people in the square and very few streets to escape. Hundreds of demonstrators were gunned down and died there—yet another provocation of the Communist government.

At the same time, most of the Soviet soldiers had ceased fighting against the revolutionaries. Many had been stationed in Hungary for a long period and had befriended Hungarians. These soldiers realized that the crowd was not fascist as they had been told, but was composed of students and workers demanding democracy. During the next two days, sporadic fighting in Budapest and other cities continued between the armed revolutionaries and the secret police. Many secret police members went into hiding while others were killed in the fight. Some captured by the crowd were hanged on lampposts in the streets of Budapest. The entire Hungarian Army supported the Revolution, with many soldiers simply leaving the armed forces. Öcsi, who at the time served in the regular army, was told by his superior officer to abandon his unit and go home.

Finally, the government resigned. Most of the Stalinist ministers flew to the Soviet Union. Nagy Imre, a moderate Communist and a man who was trusted, became Prime Minister. The new government now included several formerly deposed and jailed members of the opposition parties. Banned democratic parties and institutions were reactivated. Independent newspapers of the pre-Communist era were suddenly republished, which was a very important change after years of having a press exclusively

controlled by the Communist Party. Newspapers and independent radio broadcasts announced that Soviet troops were leaving Hungary. Also, full support of the Western democratic states and the United States was promised. Nagy declared Hungary to be a democratic and independent country. People were ecstatic as life began to normalize.

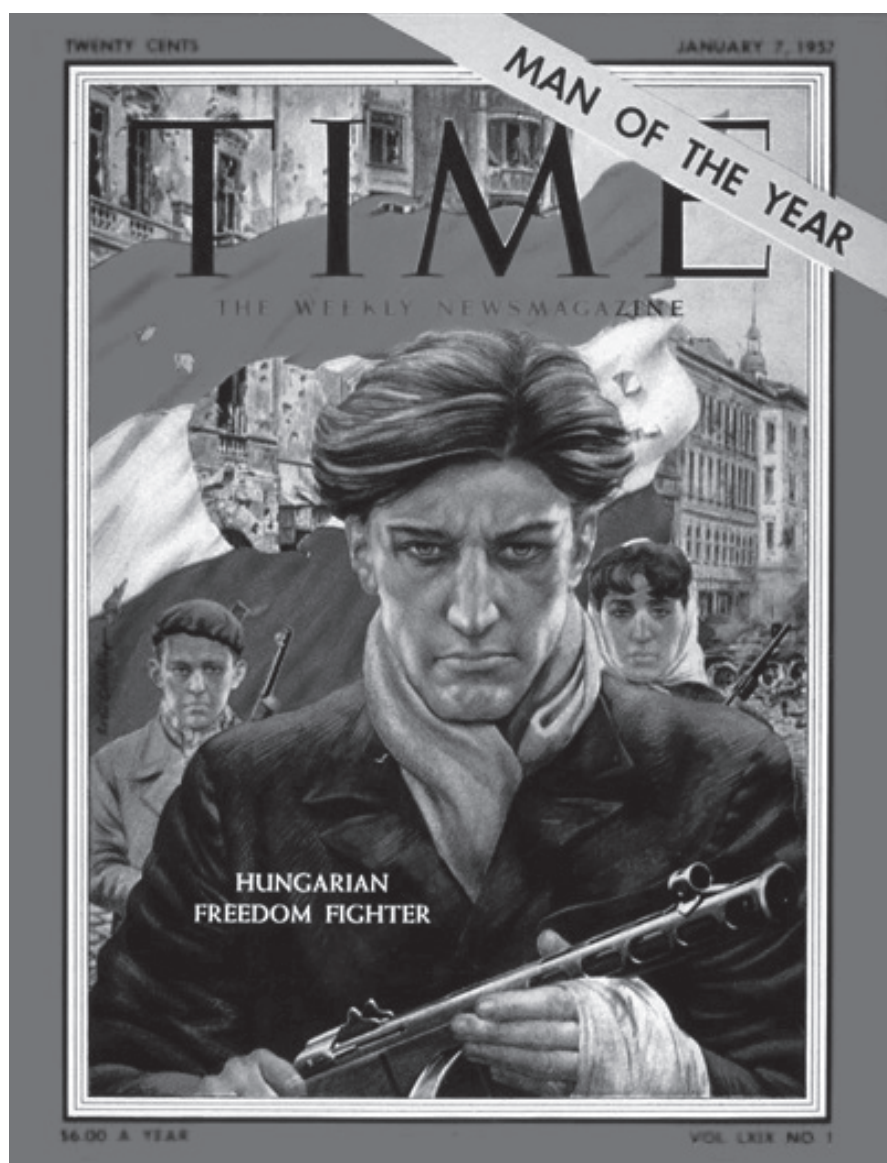
When I returned to work, the acting chief, a respected professional person, asked me to serve in the “Revolutionary Council” which was established to lead the company during the transition. Our first task was to fire all Communist management personnel. They had been placed in key positions by the Communist Party and most were not qualified to run enterprises. We had an easy task because none of these Communist supervisors showed up for work; they were in a panic and had disappeared. As we took over management of the company, we discovered all the secret personnel documents the Communist system used to judge someone’s reliability. I found my personnel report; it was interesting reading that confirmed the appalling motivations of my former Communist classmates at the University. They had wanted to undermine my professional future by filing all sorts of accusations about my character and political unreliability. In brief, I was declared unfit for a management position and labeled a fascist, like everybody else who had not fully supported Communism.

Although the news reports had been optimistic in reporting the departure of Soviet troops from Hungary, on November 4, I was awakened by the sounds of nearby gunfire. Soon we saw Soviet tanks moving through our street and randomly firing into apartments. The radio was still controlled by the revolutionaries who announced that large Soviet tank units and troops were moving into Hungary. Nagy Imre, along with other leading politicians and the chief of revolutionary army, were invited to Soviet Army headquarters for dinner and friendly discussions. But they were all arrested there and later executed. The Hungarian Army

defended the City and brutal fighting between Hungarian and Soviet troops went on for several days. The radio station also begged for help from the NATO countries and the UN. Unfortunately, help never arrived.

Within a few days, the Soviet Army had recaptured the entire country. Many of the revolutionaries died or were taken prisoner during the fierce fighting. By the end, a new government loyal to the Soviet Union had been put in place. This situation was a very depressing reality to face. Survivors of the secret police operated once again and started to arrest those who had taken an active part in the Revolution. Certainly, my brief activity in the workers' council could have resulted in my arrest and perhaps deportation to Siberia⁶.

6 For a comprehensive history of the Hungarian Revolution, read: *Time's* January 7, 1957 "Man of the Year" issue in the magazine's archive: <http://magazine-directory.com/Time.htm>. Click at lower right side: "The Covers Archive" and search for January 7, 1957.



The Great Escape

We heard on the radio Free Europe that thousands of Hungarians were escaping to the West and the “Iron Curtain”, consisting of barbed wire and hidden mines on the Hungarian-Austrian border, had been removed. Border patrols were still disorganized with many remaining in hiding because of fear of retribution. This situation presented an opportunity to escape to the free world.

Marika and I immediately decided that this was the right time to leave Hungary. We kept our plans secret from our parents, anticipating that our departure would be a terrible shock to them. We believed that if we left the country illegally, we would never see them again. Every evening, we held exhaustive discussions with our friends, because we assumed, that escaping together with them, would make all our future lives easier. But Cibi always found an excuse to wait a few more days. Marika recalls that I sat silently for hours on the edge of our bed contemplating what to do, which was strange because from early childhood I had wanted to emigrate from Hungary. Actually Marika and I had differing fears. Marika’s main concern was the difficulty we would face in the process of escaping. A large area near the Austrian border was off-limits for everybody who was not a resident of that area. Just traveling near the border could have resulted in our arrest.

Moreover, we were unfamiliar with the border area with Austria because even maps of the region had been classified. I assumed that if thousands of people had managed to escape to Austria, we would be able to make it successfully as well. But, despite studying German, French, Latin, and Russian for many years, I had never traveled outside of Hungary. I did not converse in any foreign languages and always found it very difficult learning a new one. Therefore, my worries were mainly related to functioning and making a living in a foreign country. While these concerns had a somewhat paralyzing effect, the fact that we were hiding

our planned departure from our parents compounded our worries.

Time for escape was running out, however. The border police were being re-established and they were already securing the main highways leading to Austria. Also across the border, refugee camps were becoming overcrowded, and getting help for the refugees was increasingly difficult. Jenő papa, who was both realistic and brave, came to our room one evening and asked us, “Why are you staying? There is no future here and you should escape from Hungary.” This was incredible encouragement from him. He loved Marika so much and his son Eli had left the family years earlier. Certainly he realized that he would face a terrible loss with our departure. As I was still debating what to do, Marika told me one evening that she was going to escape the next day. Her brave statement decided my action. We made a final call on Panni and Cibi, but they declined to join us. Borika and Pista initially wanted to come along and leave with us, but by next morning they had changed their minds. They had a baby girl, and Borika’s mother blocked the door to prevent them from leaving. Sixteen years later, after Pista had been working for years in Africa, they arrived in America with three kids.

The next day we departed. The most difficult task for me was to tell my parents. My mother never wanted to experience anything outside of Budapest and Baja. My father was opposed to doing illegal things, even if they entailed disobeying Communist laws. However, they realized that we were firmly decided on escaping. Anticipating that we would never see them again, our farewell to our four parents was heartbreaking. We took a train toward Western Hungary, hoping that we could get close to the border. The train was full of people traveling toward the border for the same reason. About 30 miles from the border, the border police raided the train, and took everyone off who was not a resident of the Austrian border area. Along with about 200 fellow travelers we were jailed. The fact that we could see

the free land of Austria from the jail window added to the cruelty perpetrated by the border police. Next morning, we were put on a special train back to Budapest that carried only our group of captured escapees. Our identities were sent ahead to the police in Budapest to ensure that our ordeal would not end because they would be waiting for our arrival. Soon the train made an unscheduled stop. I did not see any guards nearby and we jumped off. I could not face returning to Budapest and going through another farewell with our loved ones when we departed for a second escape. We managed to hide in the bushes until the train started moving again. We walked to the next rail station and learned that the next train heading toward the Austrian border was scheduled for the evening. We decided to wait for that train and continue our journey.

To avoid suspicion and potential arrest, we left the train station, rented a room at a nearby inn and stayed there until our train was supposed to arrive. In the evening, we went back to the rail station only to find out that the train was arriving late. The station restaurant was crowded with local peasants because the monthly farmers' market was taking place that day and many of them were waiting for the same train to return home. We sat and talked with some local people at a table. Then a man approached us, showed his police identity card, and sat down next to us. He quietly told us that we were obviously trying to cross the border illegally and ordered us not to take the train, but wait there with him until the crowd departed. Members of the secret police like him did not yet feel secure in the countryside because active resistance was still prevalent. The police were afraid to remove us while the crowd was watching and would perhaps prevent our arrest. Of course, we were in panic, to the point of paralysis. Then I told the police that I had to go to the toilet. Since Marika remained with him, he allowed me to go. In the restroom, several local people questioned me what was happening. I told them that the secret policeman sitting with us had threatened our arrest. They assured me that they would prevent it by starting diversionary

activity when the time was right.

When our train arrived, a few boys surrounded the policeman and told him to come outside because they wanted to talk to him. He was intimidated and followed them outside while motioning for us to stay. Within seconds, two boys rushed in and told us to go with them. Marika was so afraid she could not move, but the men grabbed her and carried her out. We were put on the steam engine and the train started to move immediately. It turned out that the railroad personnel were involved in the plot as well. The policeman and his aide jumped onto the last passenger car and started a search, but we were not in the passenger area. Soon, the train stopped between stations, and our guys told us to get off. We were left standing in the dark December night in the middle of nowhere. We walked with one of the boys to a nearby village. He led us to his home, and told his mother and grandmother that we would be staying with them for a few days until the search for us would cease. They knew a local man who would guide us close to the border, when the neighborhood was safe and calm again.

These friendly peasant people treated us well for the next few days. Early in the morning they served us a water tumbler filled to the tip with homemade brandy. The third day, the natives reported that the roads were clear. A local man volunteered to guide us to the Austrian border for a large sum of money and we started our walk toward the border through plowed muddy fields, carefully avoiding roads. After several hours, we reached a dense forest. The guide told us that we had arrived very close to the border but, that he would not go any further with us because, it was too dangerous to be near the border. He instructed us to walk straight through the forest and we would reach a creek called *Pinka* that constituted the border. We were to cross the creek and once we had done so we would be in Austria. He took our money and quickly left. We had no other choice than to move forward. It is dark by 4 PM in Hungary during December,

especially in a forest with no moonlight.

Eventually we met two young men trying to attempt the same thing so we decided to remain with them. They assured us that they carried loaded pistols and if we met with the border police they were going to shoot. We were not very happy about the prospect of being in the midst of possible gunfire. (We did not even like watching Western movies.) Well, we lost our sense of direction; we were probably going in circles. Very late at night we came across a highway. We were so tired by now that we decided to follow the dangerous road and stop at any house with the hope of meeting some friendly occupants. Suddenly, in the middle of the road we saw the silhouette of a soldier, and as we approached, he took hold of his rifle and pointed it at us. We three men said that we'd better raise our arms to surrender, but, Marika said: "no way, let's jump into the forest by the side of the road." We did, waiting for that soldier to start shooting. He didn't.

We continued wandering in the dark forest and finally found a creek with a wooden plank that crossed it; we decided to cross the creek. Marika and the two men made it, and I followed as the last person. When I was about in the middle, the plank broke and I fell into the creek. I swam the last few feet, climbed out and in the freezing weather my coat immediately froze. We then noticed a little flag on a stick and in the darkness we tried to decide its coloring. Both the Austrian and Hungarian flags have a row of colors: red-white-red for Austria and red-white-green for Hungary. In the darkness we could not distinguish the colors until we could light a match. It turned out to be the Austrian flag! It was encouraging evidence but not fool-proof. The Voice of America warned refugees that to confuse them, the police had intentionally placed Austrian flags on Hungarian soil. From the distance, we observed cars in motion and decided to walk in that direction. Now, we were walking among vineyards and saw a wooden cabin. As I was freezing, we decided to go in and spend the rest of the night there. The cabin was open, and we found more confusing evidence: there was a stove with a sign that said, "Made

in Hungary”, but, there were Austrian newspapers to light a fire. Therefore we didn’t know yet if we had successfully escaped to Austria or if we were still in Hungary. We made a fire and decided to dry up and wait until the morning. As the sun was rising in the morning I looked out the window. Against the sun I saw two uniformed men walking toward the hut. But the sun was rising behind them so I could not decide whether they were wearing Hungarian or Austrian uniforms. I spent the longest moments of my life. Perhaps those moments lasted only for a few seconds or minutes, but these men held our future in their hands: freedom or arrest.

Two Austrian border policemen with a German Sheppard dog came to the hut and greeted us. We were crying and hugging them. They told us that we were lucky because we were in an area where the borders of Hungary, Yugoslavia and Austria intertwined in very convoluted ways. If we had gone in the direction of the car lights from the highway, we would have walked right back into Hungary. My frozen clothes and need for warmth may have prevented us from returning to Hungary.

On our first morning in the free world, we were in an ecstatic mood. It was almost impossible for us to comprehend that we had finally left our native country and would no longer face discrimination and threats. Moreover, Marika and I would be in command of our future. With our newfound freedom, we would make our own decisions and draw on our diverse strengths, personalities and professions.

On the other hand, our environment and education in Hungary had exposed us to the fine arts, literature, music and science—areas that had enriched our existence. In our new life, we would be missing a portion of that ambiance. Also, we were fully aware of the price of losing our valued contacts with parents, relatives and good friends. Nevertheless, during the past 55 years we never experienced homesickness or even had nostalgic feelings for Hungary.

A New Life in Freedom

***The Beginning of Emigration:
Austria December 13, 1956—April 6, 1957***

The title above indicates that this section covers less than four months of my entire history. During this brief time, Marika and I experienced dramatic changes and had to make important decisions that influenced the rest of our lives. In retrospect, I think we made them very well.

On December 13, 1956, at about 7 AM, the Austrian border guards came and a completely new phase of our life began. At first, it was impossible for us to comprehend the significance of what was ensuing. It was strange that we had not even the slightest premonition about our future path or even any idea about the continent on which we would ultimately settle. But we realized that for the first time we would be making lifelong decisions and were fully responsible for our futures. This new prospect was a bit scary.

The Austrian guards took us to Güssing, a small town in the Burgenland region of Austria. Obviously, given the events of the previous weeks, collecting Hungarian refugees in the morning had become routine for them. The soldiers treated us correctly, but without any overt signs of welcome. (Unfortunately, along our way, the soldiers met some friends and had a long conversation with them. While we were standing there outside in the freezing morning, Marika's foot in her damp shoes developed frostbite, which remained painful for years). Finally we arrived at the village and were led to the school that was full of fellow refugees or "*Flüchtlingen*" according to our new Austrian title. After a while, we were transferred to the fire station, which had straw on the floor for comfort, and were told that buses would eventually transport us to a refugee camp. About 100-150 people were waiting for transport. Among the fellow *Flüchtlingen*, we discovered a young man whom we knew from the regular

balcony audience at the Budapest Opera House. Also, I became friendly with another fellow who slept next to me on the straw-bed. It was the weekend and transportation did not arrive. Incidentally, up to now, nobody from the Austrian authorities had asked who we were or had required any IDs. We were told that these would be looked at in the camp, and we were instructed to stay in town. But there were no guards watching the group. Some of the local police occasionally came by for a little chat.

As the word “Austrian camp” brought back some appalling associations, we were contemplating another escape. Marika had US\$20 concealed in the lining of her overcoat, which at the time still had significant value. Marika’s aunt Katus had given it to her as a farewell present. To keep Western currencies in Hungary was illegal and this represented the entire foreign currency her family possessed. We decided that as soon as the banks opened on Monday we would exchange it for Austrian schillings and travel to Vienna. Our two new acquaintances had also obtained some local currencies. We decided to move out together. We got to the bank exchange on Monday morning and found out that there was a bus to Vienna at 5 AM. Early next morning we quietly walked out of the fire station and headed to the Austrian capital.

The bus drove through the Alps, but we were so exhausted that we slept most of the time despite efforts to stay up and enjoy the fantastic scenery. Finally we arrived in Vienna and aspiration became reality. The distance between Budapest and Vienna is about 200 miles and nowadays driving between the two cities takes 3 hours. In 1956, such a trip was a dream unlikely to be fulfilled for most Hungarians. Our first look at a Western city during the Christmas shopping time was unbelievable after the dark and hopeless conditions in Budapest following the Revolution. It was getting dark, and we first had to look for some accommodations for the four of us. Finding a vacant room appeared to be hopeless because every hotel was already occupied

with Hungarian refugees. Because my clothes were very shabby, we decided that Marika should go in with one of the men accompanying us who had a decent outfit. But we had no luck in finding a vacancy even when we went to the shady part of Vienna. In the small hotels, Marika was occasionally asked how many hours she intended to spend with the man. Finally, we ran into an old friend and relative through marriage, Szende Gyuri, an orchestral musician. He had arrived in Vienna a few days earlier and advised us to inquire for vacant rooms at an agency at the railroad station (the *Westbahnhof*). He also gave us good instructions about charitable organizations that provided financial and clothing assistance. The charitable organizations were based on religion, and he told us that for the best assistance we should go to the Jewish agency.

First we headed to the *Bahnhof* and found the housing agency. We were lucky because we met Frau Paula Winter, a Viennese woman who had just accompanied her lodger to the station and was looking for new renters. Marika spoke fluent German and she quickly negotiated a rental for one room for the four of us, but at an incredibly high fee. Having no alternative, we followed Frau Winter to our new residence. The room was in a great location, but the building was old. A bronze plaque at the entrance reminded us that Joseph Haydn had lived there in the early 18th century while he was the organist of the *Mariahielfe Kirche* at the next corner.

Soon we had settled in, gone for a walk and purchased a banana from a street vendor. At that minute, it suddenly sank in that we had arrived in a new world. Since 1938, Hungary had not imported bananas and we did not even remember how one tasted. We sat down on a bench at the Burg Ring—one of the main streets—to eat and enjoy the moment. Before we could swallow the first bite, Gábor Ervin, was passing by on a streetcar, noticed us and jumped off to welcome us. I did not know him well; he had dated Thea one of Marika's classmates, and she had talked

with him a few times but our relationship in Budapest was limited to greeting each other at concerts or the opera. At first, we were unhappy that we had to socialize instead of finishing our first Western delicacy. But it turned out that it was the beginning of a very close friendship extended even to our children. Ervin arrived to Vienna earlier, and he was able to provide helpful information, such as how to register at the police, what to say when we went to the Jewish agency, etc. More importantly, he introduced us to Gerda, his Austrian friend. Her friendship improved our life in Vienna and eventually helped us to immigrate to the United States.

The next day we went to JOINT, the Jewish relief agency and received money and decent clothing. Because our Hungarian IDs did not indicate religion and because the Jewish agency provided more generous help than other religious organizations, they sometimes tested applicants with questions about their Jewish identities. I had never attended Jewish services, and we were worried about what I would do if they asked me to say a “broche”. But I guess my nose was a good enough ID because they asked no questions before providing the aid. Also, we finally registered at the police station to become official refugees. After completing these chores, we returned to our room and Marika collapsed. She was so exhausted that she slept continually for the next two days without moving, eating, etc. She barely exhibited any vital signs.

After my sleeping beauty woke we headed to the Staatsoper, the Viennese opera, to see *Tristan und Isolde*. We could afford standing room only and the opera is over four hours long. But we were so elated that it did not matter. The fact that we could attend a *Tristan* performance in Vienna was just overwhelming. (After the war, *Tristan* had been banned in Budapest.) We had not yet learned to be careful of making remarks in Hungarian, but we learned, after an unpleasant incident that evening, that Hungarian was spoken far more frequently and in more places

than we had thought. A huge woman stood in front of Marika during *Tristan* and she could not see the stage. I said to her in Hungarian: “Push that cow aside so you can see the stage”. The woman turned around and remarked proudly in perfect Hungarian, “This cow is a Wagnerian soprano.” We were very embarrassed and at the intermission we quickly disappeared so we wouldn’t run into her. But when we returned for the next act, she was standing at the door and with a friendly smile said, “My dears, where have you been during the intermission? I would have really enjoyed talking with you”. Everything is relative: for a Wagnerian soprano, a remark about large body size is considered to be a compliment.

Tristan was the first of many great performances we experienced from standing room of the *Staatsoper* during the next three months. For the first time, we saw Strauss and Wagner operas that had not been allowed to be performed in Budapest. Two more of our operatic experiences in Vienna must be related before returning to the story of our daily life: On Christmas Day, we attended a performance of *Fidelio*, an opera about tyranny, prison and finally freedom. The Russians had left Vienna only in 1955, and now, the production was greatly emphasized, with special lighting effects, the transformation from a dark dictatorship to the brightness of freedom. This scene had an enormous impact on us. Even today, some 53 years later, I get goose bumps when I recall this experience.

On New Year’s Eve, we attended *The Magic Flute* (our landlady Frau Winter, a simple woman who never been inside the Opera House before, joined us—in a few days we had managed to spread culture to the Viennese!). Even though the cast was about the greatest of that era, they had hired the Hungarian bass, Litassy György, to sing Sarastro just for a single guest appearance. He was a good Catholic, with 12 children between the ages of 3 months and 18 years, and the newspapers had run the story that he and his wife had walked across the border with

all of those children. When Litassy came on stage he received a standing ovation even before he sang a single note. (He had a solid bass voice, but he was not a great singer, certainly not at the same high level as several of the contemporary Viennese basses.) Another anti-Soviet episode occurred later in the performance—when Papageno, sung by the popular Viennese singer Erich Kunz received his drink, he spat it out and shouted: “*Pfujj Teufel es ist vodka!*”(Hell, it is vodka.)

After the New Year, it was time to think about our future. When meeting Hungarian acquaintances on the street, we no longer asked how they had gotten out, but what they were going to do. It was an unusual opportunity for all of us to relocate, potentially anywhere on the globe. However, getting entrance visas to the United States was becoming increasingly difficult because it was the most sought after destination. In the beginning, all refugees who wanted to were able to go. But by January the U.S. Congress had imposed a limit for Hungarian emigration; only people who had close relatives in the United States were allowed to go.

Hungarian jokes about immigration were told immediately. One joke was about two friends meeting on the street of Vienna; one asked: “Where are you heading?” the answer: “I will settle in Brazil”. First guy: “Are you crazy, Brazil has a terribly hot climate. Most of the time it’s 120°F in the shade.” The other: “So what, I’ll just stay out of the shade.”

I talked with Frankl Péter in the standing room at the Opera. In Budapest, he was already a celebrated pianist but was having difficulty getting engagements in the West. He said it would be easy for me because I had a degree in agriculture. I am glad he was wrong because a few years later he settled in London and became very successful, playing concerts with all major orchestras under many famous conductors.

On the streets of Vienna I also met Lóránt Endre, who had slept next to me when we were hiding from the Nazis in the shelter during the siege of Budapest. All his life he had an overwhelming devotion to French language and literature. When I inquired where he was going, his response was in French: “*évidemment, à Paris!*” I commented that going there might be impractical; most people spoke French in Paris and therefore it would be difficult making a living as a French teacher. Perhaps in a non-French speaking country he could do better as a French teacher. He replied that it was his lifelong dream to live in France and he was going there no matter what. For 18 years we had no contact with each other until his sister Edit, a close childhood friend of Marika’s, found us. She visited us in San Francisco and after greeting her I inquired about her brother? She replied that: “He is fine; he is a professor of French literature at the Sorbonne University in Paris and he has become a foremost authority on the works of Honoré de Balzac.” I was delighted to learn that my premonition back in Vienna was incorrect.



First Picture in the Free World, Vienna, January 1957;

In front of the Burg, where Marika worked

Her drawing table was located next to the balcony.

An infamous place: In 1938 Hitler announced from the balcony
the “Anschluss” (annexation) of Austria.

We started to discuss relocation plans. Our first desire was to remain in Europe. One idea was to stay in Vienna, and for me to study medicine at the University. We were also thinking about Denmark. In Budapest, when I worked at the seed company, we had imported Danish products that were of the highest quality. I found the Danish company representative in Vienna and called him. Naturally, he was a Hungarian. He was very kind and invited me for lunch. He told me that the Danish company was family-owned and all significant positions were held by family members. At best, I could work there only in a very low-level position and not have much hope for advancement. This discouraged me from moving in that direction.

Immediately after our arrival in Vienna, we contacted Eli (Marika’s

brother). He did not offer immediate help other than encouraging, almost demanding, that we move to Israel. He organized an Israeli diplomat to meet with us to make arrangements to move there. We did not want to settle in Israel and decided that it was not an option. Our choice was cemented by the concurrent hostility between the Egyptians and the British over control of the Suez Canal. We had already been in the middle of numerous battles and looked forward to settling in a peaceful country, far away from historical incidents. After a long and unpleasant confrontation, we got rid of the insistent Israeli agent.

I wrote to a family friend, Aladár Haberman, in Milan. His reply was very kind: he sent us money and he said that he would be happy to have us. But opportunities for foreigners were limited in Italy, and we would be better off going to the Americas. Of course, he was right. Incidentally, a few years ago when searching in the attic, his daughter Anna-Maria found the letter I wrote to Aladár from Vienna 51 years earlier. She located me through the Internet. She is a physician living in Milan and we have now become close friends.

I had one American connection in Florida, a lady who used to work in the factory our family owned in Baja before she immigrated to the United States in the 1920s. She contacted us after the war because she had read my mother's name among the survivors and she asked if she knew something about her parents who were deported from Baja; my mother had answered with the sad news that her parents had most likely perished in Auschwitz. After that exchange, she sent us food packages because we were still experiencing food shortages. At this time, I wrote a letter to her expressing our desire to settle in the United States. She replied that she would sponsor us after we arrived. However, because we were not close relatives, her invitation did not help advance our immigration.

In the meantime Marika decided to try for a job. She applied at

the *Kunsthistorisches* Museum, saying that in Budapest she had worked in the Art Museum. A very nice manager interviewed her. When he learned that Marika had skills in calligraphy, he offered her a job. During the Soviet occupation, most treasures of the Museum had been hidden from the Russians. Now that the Soviets had left, Austria felt it was time to exhibit these treasures again. The Museum needed somebody to write the titles for these masterpieces and Marika was hired to do this work. Given the money she earned, we no longer had to depend on charity. In 1968 we revisited the Museum and many famous paintings were still identified with Marika's hand-made signs.

In early January, Gábor Ervin told us that he was moving to Canada and recommended that we join him. I signed up for Canada and received my papers to go there, but at the last minute we decided to delay our departure. The night before Ervin departed for Montreal we met him and Gerda at the Opera. She worked as an interpreter for the American Consul in charge of the Hungarian refugee program. Gerda spoke German, Hungarian and English fluently so she was a unique person for this job. Gerda told me to call her because she might be able to help us. When I called next day, she told me she could not help with our U.S. immigration but could help me find a job at the American Consulate. I was hired there.

From the beginning of January both of us worked and our combined incomes enabled us to enjoy Vienna. We visited museums, historical sites such as the Schönbrunn Palace and Gardens and, of course, we also attended good concerts and many opera performances.

We had another lucky break. Marika's boss at the Museum was appalled when he learned the high price we were paying for our room. The Museum had a guest room for visitors, and he offered to let us live there free of charge. It was a nice room right under the mummies of Egyptian Kings in the middle of the city. Both

of us could walk to work and enjoy life in the evenings. Moreover, it was a very respectable address. Once a month as a refugee I had to register at the police station. When I went there and the policeman asked for my residence, I gave him the Museum's address. He was so impressed that he asked me to sit down. This was typical of the Viennese police. I am sure he had never been inside the Museum, but he certainly respected art.

The American Consulate was a great place to work. From our living quarters, I could walk over to its nice offices across from City Hall. Also, in this job I enjoyed a five-day workweek for the first time in my life, given that in Hungary we had to work on Saturdays. About 12 new Hungarian refugees worked at the American Consulate and I was the only one among them who did not speak English. Nonetheless, my title was "interpreter" and my first job was to translate application forms submitted in Hungarian. For that task you did not have to speak the language, just translate simple words like "married," "occupation" etc. The American Consul was very kind. Every morning he greeted us in English; he was a career diplomat, but typical of the Foreign Service at that time he did not speak German. He was even proud of his deficiency, telling jokes about his inability to communicate with common Austrians. One funny incident I remember was that one of the American secretaries came over as I worked at my desk and after providing a long instruction in English, which I did not understand, gave me a rubber stamp with the American emblem. I accepted it, but to this day I cannot figure out what I was supposed to do with it.

After a while, I was assigned to a more difficult position. I had to stand at the gate of the Consulate and accept applications, but could not allow anyone to enter the building. A marine helped turn away the more aggressive applicants, but of course he did not speak Hungarian. Most of the applicants were not as fortunate as we were. They had no occupations or income and, with nothing else to do, they showed up daily at the Consulate in the

hope of accelerating their immigration date. That was futile because nobody could influence the strict rules of the Consulate. Unfortunately, they believed that I had connections and when they recognized me on the street or at a restaurant, they tried to bribe me with a few dollars. Obviously, their relatives in Chicago had sent them money and told them to use it to bribe the Consulate employees.

I never accepted any money, but another Hungarian employee did. He was stupid enough to visit a casino frequently to play roulette with the bribery earnings. The FBI became suspicious and found out the source of his money, whereupon he was excluded from going to America. I had often had lunch with this fellow, and before I had heard the story about his bribery I had a long interview with the FBI one afternoon. It turned out that I was under suspicion because of my association with the other employee and thus was interviewed by two FBI agents even before I arrived in the United States. They questioned me for several hours, asking very trivial questions. I had no idea what they were up to. Finally, they asked if I knew this Hungarian and I said I worked with him at the Consulate but had not known him before. Then, came the loaded question: "Has anybody tried to bribe you?" I said "Yes, many times," but indicated I had never accepted bribes and had not done any favors for people. They asked how people had tried to give me money. I told them that they often put money between pages of the application they handed to me. Other times, they stopped me on the street as I was walking home. Next question: "Why did I not report these incidences to my supervisor? (I did not want to say, "Because I cannot speak English." Incidentally, the agents used an interpreter for the interrogation). I told him that the people who wanted to bribe me were fellow Hungarian refugees. I felt compassion for them and therefore did not want to stir up any trouble. At that point the agents stood up, shook my hands and said, "Have a nice trip and we wish you good luck in America!" I only then realized that this interview had been about whether I would have

a future life in America. If I had not convinced them of my innocence, I would never have been allowed to immigrate.

By this time, we were convinced that our best future would be in the United States. The exact moment for that decision happened during a dinner with Marika's boss, the Director of the Art Museum. During the dinner, he inquired what our future plans were. It would have sounded stupid or irresponsible to answer that we had no such plans. So I told him that we would like to stay in Europe, perhaps continue my studies, and that we were also considering going to America. His response was that if he were 25 years old he would definitely settle in America. He continued, "If you do not like it, you can always return, but now you have a unique chance to go." This advice was given by somebody who had traveled to New York several times and who, as the Head of the Viennese Art Museum, had reached one of the most desirable positions that an art historian could even dream about. We repeated this comment to ourselves and decided that we would be going to America.

We submitted our request for admission. During the next couple of months, nothing happened so we continued to enjoy our life in Vienna and the remarkable opportunity of living in the Art Museum. Towards the end of March 1957, the American Consul announced that the Hungarian refugee quota was full and that transport of refugees to America would end soon. He asked whether anyone employed there wanted to go to America. Of course, we all wanted to—that was the primary reason for working there. He wrote down our names and assured us that all of us, along with our families, would be on the last available transport. It sounded almost unbelievable. But he fulfilled his promise and even arranged extra privileges to make our travel pleasant.

When Marika reported to her supervisor that we would be departing soon to America, he arranged a farewell dinner and surprised us with box seats for a performance of *Elektra* at the Staatsoper.

In the meantime, we were told by consular personnel that we were not required to report to a group-assembly place. We could remain at our residence because the Consulate would provide transportation for us to the airport at departure time. We appreciated this privilege because transport of refugees to America was by U.S. military plane, but with no fixed schedules. Instead, flight departures were subject to the availability of planes (the old propeller type), weather conditions, etc. Therefore, other refugees might wait for their flight for days, or even weeks, at the airport. The waiting area at *Schwechat*, the Viennese airport, was destroyed during World War II and had not yet been rebuilt. As a result people sat on hangar floors while waiting for their flight to the States.

We still had some money and decided to have one more special night before departure. The Vienna Opera occasionally staged productions of Mozart's operas in a special small theater inside the Royal Palace where Mozart had performed, with audiences limited to about 500. We managed to purchase tickets to *Le Nozze di Figaro* performed with a legendary cast. Indeed, the performance was like a dream. After the show, we walked home to the Museum through the Royal Gardens on a perfect spring evening. At that moment we could not comprehend leaving this magical city. We rang the bell at the Museum, and the concierge excitedly welcomed us and delivered the news: "you have a telephone message from the American Consulate. Early tomorrow morning you will depart for America." To the surprise of this man we made very sour faces. He was puzzled because all that evening he had been looking forward to delivering a great message and expected a very joyous reaction instead of two discouraged young people.

But we had already made the commitment. We quickly packed our limited possessions and waited for the transport. Next morning, the Consulate's minivan picked us up. About 12 former Hungarian employees of the Consulate were in the car. We were

driven straight to the plane and given priority boarding. When the rest of the “ordinary” refugees were allowed to board, they were obviously hostile toward us. We looked refreshed while they were worn out from spending several days on the airport floor waiting for this flight.

This was our first air travel, and I am surprised that we ever wanted to fly again. It was an old propeller aircraft flying at low altitude so that even in light winds, it bounced violently. The flight lasted 26 hours between Vienna and New Jersey with two refueling stops. First we landed at Shannon, Ireland, where we were treated by the Red Cross to a very generous dinner served at an exclusive club. The next morning, we landed in the New World. We arrived during a major snowstorm at Gander Airport on the Canadian Island of Newfoundland. On this first glimpse of the “New World” we saw little else than snow-covered fields, the most unpleasant part of the flight occurred between Gander Airport and Newark, New Jersey. We flew continuously through big storms and most people became sick from the violent bouncing of the plane. Finally on April 6, 1957 we landed in New Jersey. The airplane door was opened and an American soldier came in, greeting us with a friendly “*Jó Reggelt Kivánok*” (Good Morning) and distributed leaflets with greetings from President Eisenhower. It was a nice welcome by the military. They had assigned Hungarian-speaking soldiers to guide the new Hungarian immigrants.

***Settling in America, a Challenging Beginning:
April 5–June 1, 1957***

We were transported by bus to Camp Kilmer, near the town of Edison, New Jersey. These military barracks had been used during WWII as a gathering point for troops going to fight on the European front. The base, which had been inactive for years, had been reopened as the receiving site for Hungarian refugees. Most of the personnel, who consisted of Hungarian-speaking soldiers, tried to make our life as pleasant as possible (except when they made unsolicited amorous advances to women). It was our fellow Hungarian refugees who made life unpleasant.

Immediately after our arrival, we went through immigration formalities. In Vienna, we had already passed the physical examination process. As I noted previously, we had learned that the Hungarian refugee quota approved by a special act of Congress was already exhausted. A new bill, requested by President Eisenhower to expand the quota, had failed, in part because Senator McCarthy opposed the admission of more Hungarian refugees. He argued that we had been indoctrinated by Communist ideology and would “poison” America. It did not matter to him that we had been fighting against the Soviet political system. To circumvent this immigration policy, we were admitted on “parole,” receiving a white card instead of the green card that was a prerequisite for obtaining U.S. citizenship. The parole status allowed a one-time entrance to United States. We could not return to the States, even if we visited Canada, and the parole status did not guarantee future U.S. citizenship. It took years and the demise of McCarthy before our parole status was changed to permanent residency and receipt of a green card.

Refugees had to remain in Camp Kilmer until an American sponsor agreed to find them employment and was willing to support them in the meantime, or until some charitable

organization volunteered to do the same. Most refugees were sponsored by their religious group, but we decided to register with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a secular organization sponsoring university-educated professionals. They contacted our sponsors, Ilus and Bandi Krausz in Hollywood, Florida, who confirmed that they would take care of us. So, in two days we were on our way to Florida. Although we soon found out that going there was a mistake, we were anxious to leave the refugee camp and start our new, independent lives.

Our bus ride from New Jersey to La Guardia airport took us across Manhattan; we passed the Empire State Building and crossed the busy Avenues. We felt an immediate desire to forget about the great tropical land of Florida and live in New York City. We were, and remain to this date, city dwellers; living in proximity to a major city has been a primary aspiration throughout our lives. But at that time we had to move on. Our flight to Miami was scheduled for early the next morning, and the IRC reserved a motel room overnight for us near the airport. What a great experience that was! For the first time in our lives, we stayed in an American motel equipped with a private bath and other “luxuries.” We felt we had arrived in Heaven!

The next morning we experienced our first commercial air flight. One problem was that we were not assigned adjacent seats. I did not speak a word of English, and this was the first occasion in America that I was separated from Marika who had learned English while attending an English elementary school. I was seated next to a very verbal gentleman, who talked to me all the way to Miami. I maintained an intelligent gaze, looking with admiration at the photos of his family and his dog, thus he did not realize that I did not understand a word he was saying. Unfortunately, at the time there were no smoking restrictions on airplanes, and he was a heavy smoker. Each time before he lit up another Camel he offered me one as well. I could not articulate that I didn’t smoke, and did not want to reveal my ignorance of the language.

Therefore, I had no choice other than to accept the cigarette and simply say: "Thank you," which represented 100% of my English vocabulary. As a result of the many cigarettes, I was quite dizzy after the four-hour flight to Miami.

After landing in Miami, we met our sponsors and experienced our first look at a tropical landscape. I was familiar with some of the plants from our greenhouses in Hungary, although these were much larger because they were growing naturally. Moreover, as we were driven north to Hollywood we drove along the ocean. It was our very first close look at the Atlantic, so a long-held dream, once thought to be almost impossible, had come true. Then, we made a stopover at a supermarket, which was an astonishing sight for us after experiencing food shortages and rationing during most of our lives.

However, I had one big disappointment. As a result of living under Nazi and Communist regimes, I had acquired very limited information about America because it was forbidden even to talk about its geography. My knowledge was limited to New York, Chicago, Monterey, California (Steinbeck land. He was the only American author translated into Hungarian, and we quoted many sections of his book *Tortilla Flat*.) And of course, we had dreamed of Hollywood—the movie capital of the world. What I did not know was that several cities named Hollywood existed in the States; and I did not realize the difference between Hollywood, Florida and Hollywood, California. I inquired about the location of film studios and was very disappointed to learn that they were located about 3,000 miles to the west. Hollywood, Florida's only claim to fame was its greyhound dog-racing establishment, the largest of its kind. Bandi, our sponsor proudly took us there one evening. Marika rooted for the rabbits, until she was assured that they were only fake replicas and that the dogs could never catch up with them.

Our first official duty was to stop at the county offices to obtain social security numbers. We did not comprehend the urgency of

acquiring them and did not receive an adequate explanation of what they were for. On the other hand, we were surprised that it was unnecessary to fill out forms at the local police station, which even today is still required in most European countries.

Soon, however, we realized that we were mismatched with our sponsors culturally as well as temperamentally. To give them credit, their intentions were good; after all, they had helped us to get to America without actually knowing us. But unfortunately they were uneducated people and had very different values from ours. Bandi was a watch repairman and felt that the most attractive future for us was in the jewelry business. The Krause's had arrived in America in the 1920s, and Bandi had established a small business in Brooklyn. Around the beginning of WWII, he had had a mild heart attack and therefore could cash in on an insurance policy. Housing in Florida was very inexpensive at that time, and they moved to a small house in Hollywood. He retired and spent the rest of his life fishing on his small boat. It was a good escape for him, because at home he and Ilus fought all the time. An even greater problem was that they never had children. In sponsoring us, they had expected to acquire two minor children, and as a result they told us every move to make—even concerning very basic matters—but of course we were already independent with well-established lifestyles.

When we arrived at their house we found that their extra bedroom was rented to tourists. They made arrangements for us to sleep in a nearby motel owned by Hungarian emigrants. That turned out to be a lucky break for us. Our hosts the Korda's were middle-class Jews from Budapest who had left before the Holocaust and who had a better understanding of our situation. They shared useful ideas about possibilities for our future and provided valuable help. They also contacted potential employers to find work opportunities for me. The only thing they could arrange for me, however, was caring for hotel gardens; for Marika, they found a seamstress' job in a laundry. Another Hungarian advised me to continue university studies and made an appointment for me to

see the Admissions Dean at the University of Florida and even paid my train fare to Gainesville. The Dean told me (through an interpreter) that I could start studying in the fall semester and perhaps he could find some work for me at the university. But I had to do something between April and September, which seemed to be a long time. We returned to Hollywood by Greyhound and tried to find work. At that time, Florida's economy centered mostly on tourism; thus, you were either a rich tourist or a poorly paid worker in a hotel or other tourist-related business. Because learning English was our primary goal, we moved to Coral Gables near the University of Miami and started taking evening English classes. In the meantime, I worked for a construction company as a painter. The company was owned by a second-generation Hungarian who tried to be helpful, but soon realized that I was a hopeless house painter and subsequently fired me.



**First Photo in America, Coral Gables, Florida, April 1957
Marika at the Front of our Rented Apartment**

Fortunately, we then met the Berger's, another retired Hungarian emigrant couple who had known my mother's family in Baja. They provided somewhat better ideas about how to initiate our life in America. They advised us that it would be extremely difficult to do so in Florida and that we should return to New York. Their son-in-law managed an iron factory in New York, and he would hire us to work there. We could not afford the airfare to New York so I contacted the Miami office of our sponsoring organization, the IRC, and explained our hopeless situation in Florida and asked them to finance our flight back to New York. They were very helpful and provided us with airline tickets. We felt great relief when our plane departed from Miami airport. In New York, we were picked up by the Berger's daughter. She drove us to the Berger iron factory and both of us were hired as assembly workers. The Bergers' brother waited for us at the factory and recommended that we rent a room from him. We had no other choice and happily made a deal. Located in a rundown area, practically under the elevated subway tracks, our new residence was in Far Rockaway on Long Island. We had a long commute to the factory, and one of our co-workers drove us there at a substantial fee. The work on the assembly line was terribly boring; even 15 minutes seemed an eternity. Working 6 days a week, we made enough money for food and rent. On Sundays, our only day free, we ventured by subway into Manhattan. Basically our situation was depressing. I even declared that I was ready to swim back to Europe.

Finally, we met a refined person. One of Marika's parents' lifelong friends from Győr, Adel néni, lived in the next town in Long Island. Marika had known her and liked her from childhood. We made contact and visited her. She was taking care of the home of her brother, who ran a factory in Cuba and spent most of his time there. We visited her several times and eventually she found a job for me at a nursery. Gardening was heavy work, but much more interesting than working on the assembly line of the iron factory. The work team I was part of tended the gardens of

beautiful estates, most of them located on Long Island beaches. Unfortunately, Marika had to continue working on the assembly line.

When we arrived at her house one Sunday, Adele néni was waiting for us with exiting news. Somebody had called from Cornell University and was very eager to talk to me. He proved to be Tamás Imre, one of my fellow students I had befriended at the University in Budapest. Imre, who had assumed that I had come to America, found out from my father that he might be able to contact me at Adele néni's home. I returned his call and learned that he was working as a laboratory assistant at Cornell. He had escaped from Hungary immediately after the Russian invasion and arrived in the United States in the days when helping Hungarian refugees was still in the limelight. The reason for his call was that a world-famous plant physiology professor, Professor Jean P. Nitsch, had received a new research grant, had a position vacant and desired to provide an opportunity for a Hungarian refugee.

I hesitated at first. I had never heard of Cornell and did not want to move from the New York City area. Fortunately, Adele néni and her brother convinced me that it would be a fantastic opportunity because Cornell was one of the best universities in the world. They convinced me about the potential opportunities that would result from this job. I called Imre back, telling him that I was interested, but didn't speak English yet and might be unable to function in a research laboratory. He discussed my language problem with Dr. Nitsch who decided to interview me anyway and paid for my train trip to Ithaca. In a few days, I experienced my first independent American adventure, taking the subway to Penn Station in Manhattan, and then traveling the 300 miles to upstate New York.

Dr. Nitsch and his wife Colette, who assisted him in the laboratory, spent a long day with me with Imre acting as interpreter.

As noted, Imre had arrived in America among the first group of immigrants and was thus given the opportunity of spending two months at Bard College in a concentrated English program. Jean and Colette were French. He had received his doctorate at Cal Tech, worked at Harvard and finally moved to Cornell where he established a unique and well-funded plant research program. When I met him he was already a world-famous scientist. His Ph.D. work, first published in the early 1950s, constituted a landmark discovery about the role of plant hormones and is still quoted in most plant physiology textbooks. He offered me a laboratory assistant's position and indicated I could start working as soon as we had relocated to Ithaca. This proved to be a fantastic break for us, providing an opportunity to work and live in a great academic community.

I stayed one more day and found an apartment. It was on the second floor of an old house in downtown Ithaca. The landlady was an Italian widow whom we called "Mamma Mia". She lived on the first floor of the same building. When I met her, she was praying with her rosary and simultaneously watching the Perry Como TV show, a popular program at that time. Negotiating the rent in a small town like Ithaca was simple, with no contract or lease to sign, and no references requested, just a hand shake. She gave me the house-key and I told her when we expected to arrive (all this was done with the help of Imre, who acted as-interpreter).

Having some free time, I went swimming in the University pool. In Europe, circumcision was a religious ritual practiced only by Jews, while in America it was performed on most male babies for health reasons. Having been in America for only a brief time, I was unfamiliar with this common medical practice. Thus, in the shower when I noticed that all the boys were circumcised, I drew the "logical" (European) conclusion that Cornell University was a Jewish school and so informed Marika when I called her about our forthcoming move to Ithaca. The next day I returned to Long Island to collect our few possessions, and a few days later we traveled by train to Ithaca.

*Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York:
June 1957 - September 1958*

The day of our move was June 1, 1957—my 26th birthday and our 6th wedding anniversary. My 25th birthday had been spent in a Hungarian military barracks. I had certainly experienced astonishing progress in one year. In fact, I had never experienced such rapid changes before. The difficult beginning of our life in America had lasted only two months, but it had seemed endless. Fortunately, we had been lucky in connecting with supportive people and making good decisions. Our move to Cornell opened a new chapter of our lives. I began an excellent education that resulted in advancement in the biological sciences. Besides the educational opportunity, we established close friendships with intellectuals who turned out to be helpful in shaping my later career. At the same time, we learned English and became acclimatized to the American way of life.

When we arrived in Ithaca, we had our first pleasant surprise. Dr. Nitsch was waiting for us at the railroad station. He delivered us to our new home and invited us for dinner. Marika met Colette and her sister Marie-Odille as they were cooking our dinner. Dr. Nitsch—Jean from that point forward—had noticed from my application that it was my birthday. Therefore, the dinner concluded with a cake inscribed “*Boldog Születésnapot*” (Happy Birthday) and a bottle of Hungarian Badacsony wine, which was a very hard item to find in Ithaca. Indeed, that evening began our lasting friendship with Colette and Jean.

When I started working the next day, I was assigned an independent project. Moreover, I learned that Jean and his family would spend the summer at Cal Tech in California and I would carry on the project alone. I sent him a progress report weekly and he advised me on the next steps in his replies. The assignment was a unique one; however, my childhood exposure to greenhouse

plant culture by my father was very helpful. Jean observed that cold-climate “deciduous” trees dropped their leaves in the fall, even if kept in warm greenhouses. He postulated that it must be a response to the short daylight hours. Indeed, in a warm greenhouse environment, if we reduced daylight hours by covering the plants with black curtains after 10 hours of daylight, they dropped their leaves and became dormant.

We found that, in a 24-hour cycle, the 10-hour “short” day was not critical, but the 14-hour long night that followed induced dormancy for the plant. We were able to prove this hypothesis by exposing the plants to one-half hour of artificial lighting at the middle of the dark period. After a period of 10 hours of daylight and 14 hours of night (interrupted with a half hour of light exposure), the plants kept their leaves and continued growing. This was a very important finding, and nurseries still practice this approach to enhance the growth of small trees. The study, which was published with me listed as a co-author, was well received. Ironically, years later, when I became a graduate student, the publication was required reading in the class I was taking.



At the Cornell Plant Physiology Laboratory

From left: Mary a lab assistant, Jean and Colette Nitsch, Me, and Hiroshi Harada, a Japanese graduate student/⁷

Within a week following our arrival Marika found employment at Cornell as an illustrator for the University's technical bulletins. She worked close to my lab at the adjacent building, which was important because Cornell's beautiful campus is on a hilltop. We did not have a car yet, so we commuted together by bus. As everywhere else in America, having a car in Ithaca was essential, and in our first summer we had been handicapped by our lack of transportation. Ithaca was surrounded by beautiful lakes, waterfalls and forests, and we missed enjoying these during the summer of 1957. Soon, however, I met a nice, old Hungarian greenhouse worker, Marosi bácsi, and he provided us

⁷ During our visit in Tokyo in 2010 we reunited with Hiroshi after over 40 years. He was retired vice president of Tokyo University.

with transportation to and from work. Moreover, he taught me how to drive.

Establishing life in 1957 in a small college town was unbelievably easy. On our first Saturday morning there (in that era stores were open until noon on Saturday and then closed for the rest of weekend), we stopped at an electric appliance store on State Street to purchase essential items for our kitchen. We walked out with a set of kitchenware, plates, an iron, a toaster, a TV set, and a radio. When the owner learned that I was employed at Cornell, we shook hands and he gave us all these items without making any inquiries about us. He wrote down our names and agreed that we would pay as much in installments as we could afford. Nor did he charge interest on our payments. Later, we purchased many other items in his store, including our first LP record player and camera. The cost for all these items was simply added to our account and no questions were ever asked. I still remember the store name: "Altman and Green." On Saturday mornings our first task was to walk over to the store to pay off an installment. After purchasing our LP player, which later became Peter's favorite piece of furniture, we initiated our LP collection on credit, also interest free, with the agreement sealed by a handshake with the manager.

Eventually Imre purchased a car and we were able to enjoy Ithaca's brief summer. Marika and I took driving lessons, hoping to pass our driving exams and eventually have a car, which was essential for an independent life in America. We did not yet anticipate the severe winters of up-state New York. To supplement our incomes, Imre and I found an extra job, pruning apple trees on the large estate of a manufacturing executive. At that time, dieting was no concern for anybody. At the University we could get ice cream free of charge from the dairy science laboratory, where students were learning ice cream processing. Every day we picked up a half-gallon box of a great product and after dinner we ate the entire contents. In mid-summer Nomi, Marika's

niece, Nomi's mother, brother and stepfather visited us from Montreal. Meeting her niece for the first time and seeing an immediate member of her family in the New World were joyous experiences for Marika.



**Marika's niece Nomi, Age 11, her Mother Rachel and
Brother Ronny, Visiting Us in Ithaca
Meeting for the First Time: A Happy Aunt with Her Niece,
August 1957**

In September, Jean and Colette returned from California, and my scientific training began under his valued guidance. Colette worked full time without pay in Jean's lab. Jean, who was a very meticulous and hard worker in the lab, was a warm and very kind person after work. We enjoyed many evenings and weekends with them and our relationship took on the dynamics of a family.

Our lives greatly improved in October 1957 when I passed my

driving test and we purchased our first car, a seven-year-old Dodge. Having a car allowed us to venture further away from home and campus without asking favors from others. We had not yet realized, however, the challenge of winter in Ithaca. We did not have a garage, and local snow removal regulations required parking on alternate sides of the road on even and odd days. Thus, on some weekends, when the weather was so bad that we could not go anywhere, our main task was complying with the parking rule. Doing so first involved shoveling the snow on one side of the road to make room for parking; then freeing our car from under the deep snow; running the engine for about ten minutes to unfreeze the gear shift; and finally driving to the opposite side of the road for legal parking.

Thinking back, we were fanatical about touring. Even as inexperienced drivers, we still drove to New York City for Christmas week. At that time the New York Thruway was not complete, so one had to drive from Ithaca to New York on small icy roads across the Catskill Mountains. But we were determined to go and we did and survived. This first real visit to New York was the experience of a lifetime. We visited the Metropolitan Museum, and attended the old Metropolitan Opera. Sitting in the opera house and seeing two of our favorite operas with the greatest singers of the time was an overwhelming experience (*Otello* with Mario Del Monaco, Leonard Warren and Zinka Milanov; *Don Giovanni* with Cesare Siepi, Fernando Corena, Lisa Della Casa, etc.).

On New Year's Eve 1957 we went to Carnegie Hall to hear a Philadelphia Orchestra concert, with Eugene Ormandy conducting, and then strolled through Times Square along with the midnight crowd. We had good reason to close 1957 with a great celebration. During the year, we had enjoyed three months in Vienna, immigrated to the United States, experienced our first air-transport, settled in the United States, and after some unpleasant episodes in Florida and New York, arrived in Cornell, met Jean and Colette, and for the first time could anticipate a promising

future. It was amazing that after nine months of U.S. residency we could afford to spend a week in New York driving there in our own car and seeing performances by one of the world's greatest opera companies and symphony orchestras.

On New Year's morning, we had our next challenge, which of course was related to our car. At that time credit cards had not been invented and one had to use cash even to purchase gasoline and pay hotel bills. Our car would not start, and after having it towed to a garage it was diagnosed with a dead generator. We had the generator replaced, but doing so and paying for the hotel accounted for most of our remaining cash. We had only a few dollars left, just enough to cover two hot-dogs and to fill the car (gasoline cost 18 cents a gallon then) for the return trip to Ithaca. We made it back home with no gas to spare.

During the rest of the winter, we stayed close to home, learning English and working in the lab. Gradually, I came to understand the U.S. university educational system; at that time it was unique in offering graduate courses for higher degrees. I concluded that to establish a good future I should work for an advanced degree, and it seemed obvious that I should work in Jean's lab and do my graduate studies under his guidance. I anticipated starting my studies in September. I had already gained a good start in assisting him with plant hormone research, which was a subject in its infancy. But around June Jean announced that he had accepted a prestigious director's position in France and that he would return to Paris in September. He gave me the choice of moving to France and working with him there, or of recommending me for graduate studies under another Cornell professor. I chose this latter offer and was soon accepted as a research assistant at Cornell.

In the meantime, however, we had started to look for opportunities at other universities as well. We were not content to live in isolation in Ithaca, and without Jean it looked particularly gloomy. We could not forsake our city upbringing and desired

to be close to a metropolitan area. Moreover, Marika was experiencing a painful wrist condition that prevented her from drawing, but we could not find a good orthopedic specialist in Ithaca (Cornell medical school is located in New York City.) and thus no satisfactory diagnosis of her problem. Therefore I started to send out application forms, not realizing that such letter contacts are a waste of time and postage. Mostly I received polite but negative answers: “You are highly qualified but presently we cannot offer an assistantship. We will keep your resume in our active file”.

From Rutgers University, however, I received a “maybe” letter. I found out that the Rutgers campus was a short distance from New York and well-respected for highly regarded programs in my field. But, because no direct action on Rutgers’ part followed the letter, in late August I decided to make direct contact. We drove to New Jersey without an appointment to see the department chair. Of course, he did not remember me or his reply to my letter. In fact, he had probably never seen my letter, because his secretary probably sent the same reply to every inquiry. But Dr. Norman Childers turned out to be a kind man who liked having foreign students; moreover, his wife was a second-generation Hungarian (a very common national heritage in New Brunswick, NJ). He did not offer me a job, but promised to find a grant to pay for my tuition and assistantship, and he followed up this time. A few weeks later—just about a week before the start of the school year—he invited me to be a half-time laboratory assistant and full-time graduate student working toward a master’s degree. Quickly we packed, leaving Ithaca on the same day that Jean left. It was amazing that we had arrived in Ithaca with one suitcase and 15 months later we had to rent a U-haul trailer to carry our belongings. In the meantime, although we had both received the lowest academic salary, we still had accumulated sufficient savings to purchase essential furniture for our newly rented unfurnished student apartment at Rutgers.

***Graduate Studies and a Growing Family,
Rutgers University Years:
September 1958-April 1962***

Because we arrived at Rutgers on the last day of course registration, my choice in courses was limited and therefore I had to take some classes that I would have preferred to take later when my English had improved and I had gained a better understanding of the exam system in America. Actually I passed the required English language exam without ever taking any formal lesson. Professor Norman Childers was a busy department chair (and also a full time playboy), who pretty much left me to decide my curriculum. It was a great change from Nitsch's practice; Nitsch had communicated with his students and me on a daily basis. Now, my courses included advanced biochemistry, a tough one even for seasoned graduate students. Also I registered for a graduate seminar course, where within a few weeks I had to give a 1-hour presentation to the department faculty and graduate students. At the same time I had to start my projects. Fortunately, the 15 hours per week I had to spend as a laboratory assistant for doing experiments was relevant for my diploma work as well. But that assignment also included a study with peach trees on a distant farm near Atlantic City required a four-hour drive weekly. My other assignment with cranberries was in a greenhouse adjacent to the department building, which required daily attention including weekends and holidays.

Rutgers provided a low-cost housing complex for married graduate students consisting of old "temporary" units built for returning veterans who had come to study on the GI bill after WWII. By 1958, these "temporary" buildings were in bad condition. On the positive side, however, we were surrounded by fellow students who were friendly and helpful, and the rent including all utilities was \$60 per month—a figure that represented 25% of my income. We made many long-lasting friendships there, and more

importantly besides doing my graduate education we learned many important essentials about the American way of life. The years at Rutgers greatly contributed to our adjustment to American life and customs.

Years later, I had a job interview at Hunt Foods. As the interviewer read my application listing my past residences he suddenly started to laugh. When I asked him what was so funny in my resume he said that he noticed my Rutgers graduate student housing address. He had lived in the same unit 15 years earlier when it was already in urgent need for repair, and he imagined how it must have looked when I moved there (he hired me anyway).

Marika's wrist, however, did not heal; she could not work in her profession and needed surgery. Finally she was operated on to remove a cyst between her wrist's joints at Cornell's medical center in New York City and hospitalized for five days. She received excellent care; the same surgeon had operated on famous New Yorkers, as well as performed hand surgery on famous pianist Van Cliburn.

After her recovery, Marika started to work for an advertising agency in New York City, which was quite an achievement because designers' jobs were restricted to men in that era. In the spring of 1959, Marika announced that she was expecting a baby. We were very happy. At the time we were 28 and 26 years old, had been married for seven years and lived in the era when most people had a family in their 20s. In the graduate student housing complex most fellow students had families, and we had young children all around us. When we moved into the complex, the neighborhood kids asked Marika, "Whose mother are you?" Having no children meant that she did not have an identity as far as these kids were concerned. Marika tried to continue her normal routine, but, as soon as they found out about her pregnancy at the agency, she was fired. So she stayed home, suffering in the New Jersey summer heat and humidity because the house was poorly

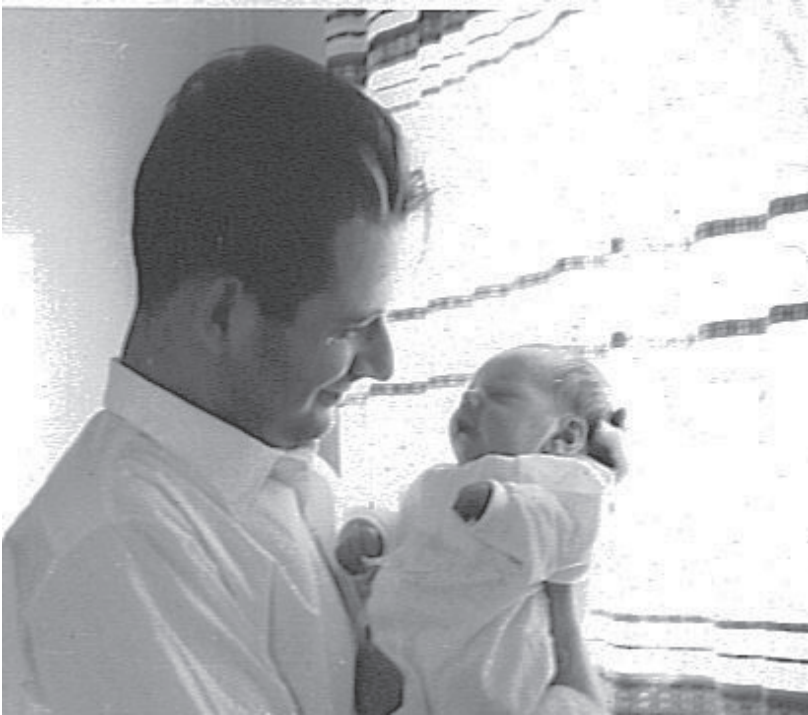
insulated and we didn't have air conditioning. She prepared for the arrival of the new family member by collecting baby clothing and furniture and by painting the nursery. We remained in the same graduate student housing complex but moved to a two-bedroom unit. In the 1950s sex identification technology had not yet been invented and because this was to be the first American child born in our family and not knowing the baby's sex, we called the baby "The Citizen".

About six weeks before delivery Marika experienced a painful incident. Jean and Colette had spent the summer at a Long Island research institute. In September, we met them at the Port of New York to say farewell. They were sailing back to Europe aboard the famous Queen Mary, and we boarded the ship with them to look around. Before departure the elevators did not work, so, Marika climbed up and down several stories to see the entire ship. Maybe this exercise was too much in her 8th month pregnancy; the next day she suddenly felt very strong pains and had to be taken by ambulance to an emergency room. She was hospitalized for a few days, but fortunately she did not experience any long-term consequences.

Sadly, this was the last time we saw Jean Nitsch. A few years later while taking underwater photographs at a Normandy beach he had a heart attack and died at age 42. He must have had a premonition, because, back in Ithaca, when we had picnics at Lake Cayuga, he always warned us to wait for at least an hour after a meal before going swimming.

Two weeks before Peter was born, we attended a performance of Yves Montand in Manhattan. He was Marika's long-time favorite and his first New York appearance could not have been missed; indeed, he was performing her favorite French songs. Peter Jean (We chose his middle name as a tribute to Nitsch.) was born on October 13. Marika did not feel well at dawn, but it was still too early to get up so she swallowed some aspirin and went back to

sleep. But around 7 AM unmistakable signs indicated that Peter's arrival was near, and we rushed to the hospital. Even though St. Peter's hospital was close by, we barely made it on time for the delivery. Everything went very quickly, without complications. At that time mothers were kept in the hospital for at least five days after delivery, with newborns kept in a nursery and released to their mothers only for feeding. I could see baby Peter only through the nursery window when a nurse lifted him up briefly for me to glance at. Remaining for such a long time in the nursery proved to be unfortunate, because Peter contracted a Staphylococcus infection there; for weeks after leaving the hospital his little face was full of red oozing blemishes. After the long wait, finally both mother and Peter could leave the hospital and a great new chapter of our life began.



Peter, October 1959 - Meeting Dad without much enthusiasm



At age 6 months, Peter is having great fun with Marika

Raising small children at Rutgers University Heights provided several advantages. Children's clothing was shared by all, with a storage room set aside for outgrown clothing and for picking up things that were needed. Through a babysitter bank, a family's hours spent in babysitting for others were credited and someone returned the same number of hours. Of course, we usually had a negative balance and owed babysitting time. One famous story was that Peter, who spoke mainly Hungarian at that time, always went to sleep to the sounds of opera recordings. We were at a dinner party when our baby sitter colleague Andre called in desperation, saying that Peter would not go to sleep and was shouting "*Zene, Zene!*" ("Music" in Hungarian). I told him to put on a record and that Peter would be O.K., and indeed Peter soon fell peacefully asleep. About 25 years later, Andre who worked in the

same field as I did called me to discuss a business matter. At the conclusion of our conversation, he asked how Peter was doing. I told him that he was fine and had just accepted a position at the Metropolitan Opera. Andre's answer was: "I'm not surprised; I knew this would happen when Peter was one year old."



**It must be Le Nozze di Figaro
At age one Peter's favorite place was at the record player**



1960 winter, in front of our Rutgers University housing

Our happy time was soon interrupted by a new problem. At her 6-months check up Marika was diagnosed as having an ovarian cyst and needed immediate surgery. She found the diagnosis hard to believe because she felt perfectly well, so she went back to the Cornell clinic in New York, but the diagnosis was confirmed. She had a successful operation but she was hospitalized

for over a week, and she missed Peter tremendously during that time. I could not take Peter to her hospital room, so after visiting her I carried Peter to an area where she could see him through the window. Also, I could not leave my experiments unattended. I took Peter daily to the greenhouse. He watched from his stroller as I took my research notes and watered my cranberry plants. Following her return to home, Marika was not allowed to lift Peter, therefore I came back several times a day to assist her.

At this point we decided that I should finish my courses and experiments required for a master's degree and find a job. I received a good job offer from a chemical company with a very attractive salary, but in the miserable location of Hopewell, Virginia, a small company town about an hour's drive from Richmond.

Fortunately, when I told Dr. Childers of our decision to leave after completion of my master's degree, he discouraged me from making the move. He strongly recommended staying to complete the Ph.D. He predicted that, if I didn't, after I left I would never return to study for a doctorate degree. Childers did more than advice; he called a contact and found a full-time job for Marika as an illustrator in the University's publications department. When I said that we would not leave Peter in somebody else's care, they offered a deal that Marika had to be at the office only three afternoons a week and could do the rest of her work at home. I stayed at home on those afternoons when Marika went to campus. Having these opportunities and two incomes, we decided to stay until I completed my doctoral work. My tuition was fully paid for by a DuPont Company grant. Today, it may seem unbelievable, but the total sum I paid for my Rutgers's education was \$13.50 for the stamp required for my Ph.D. diploma certificate.

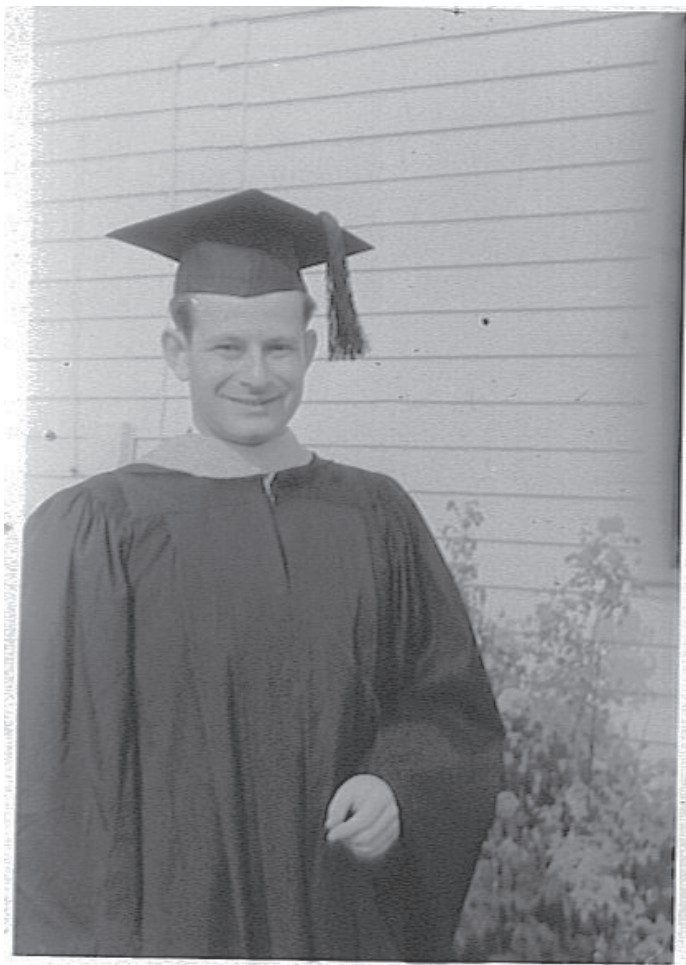
To cover extra expenses related to Peter's arrival I applied for a student loan, on very reasonable terms that had to be repaid

in 10 years following graduation. When Peter had reached his teens, I was still paying for this loan. Once, having to reprimand him for mischief I warned: “watch out, I could still repossess you!” Many years later, he told me that he took this threat seriously and was scared for a long time. (Peter, I regret causing you such anxiety.)



Rutgers University, 1960.

**Presenting results of the cranberry nutrition experiment,
the subject of my master's degree thesis, to faculty and fellow
graduate students**



**Rutgers University Commencement, May 1961.
Receiving my Master's Degree**

The city of New Brunswick had a large Hungarian immigrant community living in one district of the town. For us, however, they were the wrong kind of people, mainly former military officers who maintained their native country's customs and even promoted each other to higher military rank to provide excuses for celebration parties. The district had Hungarian schools, churches, and banks, but for us the only benefit was having a

Hungarian butcher shop and a bakery. When Peter was born, I needed some extra cash and for a few days I delivered telephone books for 5 cent per book delivered. One day I was assigned to deliver in the Hungarian district. When I rang the bell at one house, a young boy in his teens came out and told me in Hungarian that his parents were not at home. I answered him in Hungarian, asking him to accept the telephone book and departed saying “szervusz”. The amazing thing was that this young boy, living in the middle of New Jersey, was not surprised that the deliveryman could understand and speak Hungarian.

I arranged my class work according to Marika’s work schedule and worked on my term papers at home while taking care of Peter. Sometimes this task required ingenuity. For example, Marika made a mobile that hung over Peter’s playpen, and he was happy and quiet as long as the mobile was moving, but started to cry when it was motionless. To solve this problem, I figured out that if I aimed a fan toward the mobile it kept turning continuously, keeping Peter happy and allowing me to do my work without interruption.

Despite my busy schedule of studying and attending my experiments, we made the 1-hour drive to Manhattan at least once every month or sometimes even more often. Our ventures puzzled my fellow graduate students. They were completely uninterested in anything that New York City had to offer. My neighboring fellow graduate student from Arkansas who later became a famous plant breeder never went to New York during his 5-year stay in New Brunswick, which was only 30 miles from Manhattan. His wife along with other graduate student spouses did drive to New York once; they drove around a bit and returned without getting out of the car.

We attended the Metropolitan Opera as “standees”, hearing familiar pieces as well as experiencing works that were new to us, such as *Wozzeck*, *Arabella*, *Ariadne*, *Parsifal*, *Vanessa* etc;

we heard many great singers of the time, including Ramon Vinay, Nicolai Gedda, Jerome Hines, Cesare Siepi, Mario Sere-
 ni, Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill, George London, Elisabeth
 Schwarzkopf, Lisa Della Casa, Victoria de Los Angeles, Eleanor
 Steber, Carlo Bergonzi, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Richard
 Tucker, as well as Joan Sutherland, Birgit Nilsson and Leontyne
 Price in their New York debut seasons; we also saw opera and
 concerts with famous conductors: Bruno Walter (doing the Verdi
 Requiem in his next-to-last performance at the Met), Eugene
 Ormandy, Karl Böhm, George Szell, Fritz Reiner, Leonard Ber-
 nstein, Charles Münch, Dimitri Mitropoulos and Herbert von
 Karajan, and solo recitals by Arthur Rubinstein, Isaac Stern,
 Yehudi Menuhin, Nathan Milstein, Claudio Arrau, Rudolf
 Serkin, Annie Fischer, etc. - just to name the most famous artists
 we saw.

When we attended a New York Philharmonic concert for the first
 time, the orchestra's principal cellist was László Varga; from the
 last row of the balcony, we heard him playing the solo part in
 Richard Strauss' *Don Quixote* but we did not dare to approach
 him. We could not foresee that 15 years later he would become
 one of our closest friends in San Francisco. At his house we
 met many famous musicians like Starker János, members of the
 Bartók and Emerson quartets, the Beaux Arts, Kalichstein-Lar-
 edo-Robinson and Borodin trios, and dozens of other famous
 artists.

We drove in a terrible snowstorm to hear the New York debut of
 Annie Fischer at Carnegie Hall. She had been our favorite pia-
 nist in Budapest, where she introduced us to much great piano
 music in unforgettable recitals. A few days after her concert we
 were visiting at the Metropolitan Museum and heard somebody
 speaking Hungarian behind us. Turning around, I recognized
 Annie Fischer. I congratulated her, and she asked us to show
 her around the museum because she only had a brief time left
 to stay, and her escorts were unfamiliar with the museum. We

spent a memorable time with her showing her the Met's famous impressionist collection, which she and her escort had not been able to find before.

For a new experience, I joined the Rutgers University Choir, which then sang in William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Because the performance was recorded at mid-day, I had to be absent from classes. I needed an excuse and told my adviser that I was singing in the University chorus. He was truly amazed. He had never heard of such a thing as a science major Ph.D. candidate joining the chorus; in his opinion such activity was restricted to undergraduate girls majoring in the arts or humanities. Nonetheless, I have a great memory of singing with one of the greatest orchestras on the stage of Philadelphia's Academy of Music and at Carnegie Hall.

Our other break with academic custom was that when summer came, given the tradition in Hungary, we took a two-week vacation driving through the New England states. We were told later by a professor friend that graduate students in America are not supposed to take any breaks. We were able to confirm that observation because our apartment window faced the chemistry building where we saw students working in the chemistry lab past midnight every day, including Christmas. Despite these "distractions", and our enjoyment of extra-curricular activities, I was still able to get my master's and Ph.D. degrees in three and a half years and publish three of my research works in peer-reviewed journals.

After Marika recovered from surgery, our life normalized. Her work arrangements were pleasant, and her colleagues at the publication group were very supportive. I was able to concentrate on finishing my experiments and fulfilling the other requirements for my degree. Passing two foreign language exams was required before taking the Ph.D. qualifying exam. I passed German without

taking any classes, and Childers was helpful in allowing me to choose Hungarian as the second foreign language. Rutgers had a Hungarian institute headed by a Cleveland-born second-generation Hungarian idiot. He was responsible for giving me the Hungarian language exam and obviously my knowledge was superior to his. But he chose a 19th century political speech of Kossuth Lajos, which contained many ancient verbs and tenses, and old-fashioned expressions that I had to translate into English in 90 minutes. I made a few mistakes by not using the correct verb tense; I failed the exam and had to repeat it, passing it the second time. After surmounting these hurdles, I then passed the Ph.D. qualifying exam and the final for the master's degree at the same time. The remaining task was to complete a research thesis acceptable to my graduate committee.

The long-desired time of searching for a job finally arrived. We wanted to stay in the New York area as we loved the place, but I could not secure a job offer there. Unexpectedly, I found three job possibilities in California—a distant place in the “Wild West” that we had never visited before. Because we were quite skeptical about establishing roots there, I chose a temporary post-doctoral position at the University of California at Davis. I was told that it was one of the most prominent institutions in the natural sciences, and we decided that we could survive two years there and that by working there, I could enhance my qualifications. We hoped that after two years I would find employment in the New York area.

My offer from Davis was quite attractive. I received a post-doctoral fellowship from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission to study cellular changes in irradiated fruit. The research program was under the supervision of a young professor, Dr. Roger Romani, who interviewed me at the Newark Airport in a noisy waiting area where I could hardly hear what he was saying. But he made the offer and I accepted it on the spot. Food irradiation was in its infancy as a new food preservation technology, therefore offering exciting possibilities for new discoveries.



Rutgers University in 1962; My Ph.D. research study: isolating and identifying the flavor components of apples using gas-chromatography, a new analytical technology introduced at that time.

*University of California at Davis:
1962-1964*

The first morning after having arrived in Davis I had my first encounter with our new environment. Stepping out of our motel room, I experienced a clear blue sky, fresh air and an abundance of flowering camellias. Immediately I ran back into the room urging Marika to come out and share this inspiring moment. Soon we had rented a new apartment in a duplex, moved in and camped out on borrowed mattresses until our belongings arrived from New Jersey.

We immediately needed medical care for Peter who suddenly had an extremely high fever. The doctor could not explain the cause of the fever but it recurred daily for no apparent reason. Finally, the moving van arrived, with Peter's nursery furniture. When we set up his room in an arrangement similar to the one in New Jersey, he recovered immediately and no longer experienced any fever. It was amazing; apparently severe anxiety from missing his surrounding was causing his high fever. He was two years old at the time.

Davis was a small town of about 6,000 inhabitants. Only a few years earlier the campus had advanced from an agricultural experiment station to a general campus. The fields of the natural sciences and veterinary medicine dominated; the humanities and the arts were just emerging. Medical and law schools were still in the planning stage. Bicycles were the primary mode of transportation for students and faculty. Most department buildings were new, and it was a great experience for me to have lab space and an office in a brand-new modern building. Also, I had access to the first gamma-ray food irradiation facility built anywhere. The greatest advantage was, however, the friendliness of most people. In the department I enjoyed full faculty status. At Rutgers delivering a seminar was like being interrogated by the inquisition, with

hostile comments and questions from the faculty. In Davis when I presented my Ph.D. research, I received only supportive questions and compliments. Soon we had acquired more friends than ever before; also a modest-size Hungarian immigrant group lived in Davis as well. In the beginning they were helpful, but eventually they became envious because I was the only Hungarian in a faculty position, while the others were still students or worked in lesser staff positions. Eventually, however, Farkas Andris, a librarian, and Sarlós Robi, a professor of drama history, arrived; both have remained life-long friends.

Eventually we began to experience a problem we called “aquarium” living. We met daily with the very same, albeit wonderful, people in all situations: during coffee breaks, at lunch at the faculty club, in the swimming pool, at seminars and concerts, in the only super market in town and even when walking or biking.

Soon, the next important family event occurred. George was born at the end of August 1962. Because Davis had no hospital, he was born in Woodland, about 25 miles from our home. Marika woke me around 4 AM, saying that we must go. I ran next door to ask Lajos, a Hungarian neighbor, to baby sit for Peter and tried to drive as fast as I could to the hospital. Davis was linked to Woodland by a narrow country road. In August this road was frequented day and night by long and slow moving tomato delivery trucks; passing them was nearly impossible. We arrived at the hospital just in time for delivery, with no time even to fill out the entrance papers. In less than 30 minutes, George was born, healthy and beautiful. Before Peter woke up I was back home to relieve my friend so he could go to work. But first Lajos and I celebrated by drinking Hungarian apricot brandy for breakfast.

It was a coincidence that Peter’s first day at the nursery coincided with Marika’s homecoming with George. When he was brought home from the nursery George was already sharing his room. He welcomed his little brother with benevolent amusement, but in the

back of his mind he concluded that he had been sent to the nursery to allow us to devote our full attention to baby George.

Unfortunately a chicken pox epidemic prevailed in the nursery. Peter had a very mild case of this disease with only a few spots on his face. But George, who was only a few weeks old, contracted this illness and suffered severely. According to independent opinions he was a “poster baby for chicken pox”. His entire little body and face were completely covered with red blisters. One of our neighbor women started to cry when she saw him. Fortunately he was resilient and fully recovered within a few weeks.

George matured very early. To quote his first and frequent expressions he used when we wanted to assist him: “I can do it myself”. He said this with an authentic Louisiana dialect he had learned from the babysitter. Apparently he concluded that a Southern dialect is better than acquiring a Hungarian accent.



Peter's First Glimpse of Baby George, August 1962



Davis, September 4, 1962; George at 5 days of age.



**George at 3 months having fun with dad.
Obviously he was delighted with what he saw**



Six month old George singing happily with his three year old brother Peter

One can never predict the impact of certain meetings. We employed Marge, a lovely undergraduate student to help in our lab. Her boyfriend, Herbert Stone a graduate student, often dropped in to see her and we occasionally exchanged pleasantries. I would have never expected that years later, as a director at Stanford Research Institute he would offer me my most important professional break. In 1978, we even became partners in a consulting enterprise called Etel⁸ Inc., and co-owners of a beach-front vacation property on the Monterey Peninsula.

In the meantime, I was making progress on my research project. In the beginning, I had known nothing about ionizing radiation and its potential as a new food preservation technology. Before I could proceed with relevant experimentation I had to learn about the new technology's potential effectiveness and benefits, as well as associated problems. I received no help from Romani. He was already a

8 Etel means Food in Hungarian

tenured professor and he came to the lab only infrequently, saying a friendly hello to me during those visits, but he did not care what I was doing. By the end of my tenure, I had published my research results and received recognition from the University.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

CLARK KERR
President of the University



BERKELEY 4, CALIFORNIA

October 5, 1962

Mr. Laszlo Somogyi
Department of Pomology
University of California
Davis, California

Dear Mr. Somogyi:

As you probably know, I report to The Regents each month on significant developments connected with the University. An account of some of your work was noted on page 15 of my September report. I thought you might be interested in seeing a copy, which is sent with the appreciation of The Regents.

Sincerely yours,

Clark Kerr
Clark Kerr

Marika worked part-time as an illustrator at the publication department, resuming her profession at a third university. At the same time, she attended art classes given by Robert Arneson, a sculptor with a national reputation. This marked the beginning of fulfilling her long-time aspiration of becoming a sculptor. Even our baby sitter, David

Gilhoolly who became a well-known sculptor, was an art student. Years later, we found out about his artistic success in a Time magazine article we read while traveling abroad. We cherish the museum-quality armadillo sculpture he gave us when we visited his studio.

The big question still remained of how we could experience satisfactory opera performances so far from the Met. That question was soon answered when we attended a Falstaff performance at the San Francisco Opera's 1962 fall season. After a few measures, as Geraint Evans and Thomas Stewart began singing a duet, we looked at each other with relief, recognizing that after all we could still experience great performances even in the Wild West. At that time we were unfamiliar with these two great artists, both of whom enjoyed worldwide admiration in later years. This great performance was followed by many equally memorable ones. During the 1960s and 1970s, the San Francisco Opera was one of the greatest companies in the world.

In the summer of 1963, we took our first vacation in California, visiting Yosemite Park, Carmel and Los Angeles. Attending our first concert at the Hollywood Bowl was another reminder of how far we had come. It was very moving sitting under blue skies in the legendary Bowl and experiencing the performance of Ferencsik János, who was our favorite conductor back in Budapest. Meeting him at a dinner party and admiring his super intellect is a memorable experience for me.

Toward the end of 1963, I had to think about our next move, as my postdoctoral appointment was approaching its end. That period was a discouraging one for seeking a job. In the beginning, my job search was limited to academia and government research. Following President Kennedy's assassination, however, the economy was in poor shape and one of President Johnson's first orders was placing a freeze on all government hiring; therefore, the desirable option of working in a USDA plant research laboratory was no longer available. The only offer I received was a tenure-track faculty position

at the University of Florida. However, we viewed moving to Gainesville without enthusiasm because we had become acclimated to the West, and I was only interested in finding employment in California.

One day I attended a seminar at the USDA laboratory in Albany, California (for those familiar with the East Bay, the lab is still there at the Buchanan Street exit of Route 80). On arrival, I entered the same elevator as Dr. Harold Olcott, a professor colleague and a third man. Harold knew about my discouraging job search. As we were ascending, he said, “László, have you thought about an industry job?”, and introduced me to Dr. Virgil Wodicka, the third person in the elevator who was research director at Hunt-Wesson Foods. Virgil invited me for lunch, and he offered me a research position at Hunt’s in Fullerton, California. He gave me only one warning: as long as I worked for him, I should never experiment with or should even mention food irradiation technology. Ironically, a dozen years later as the director of FDA’s food division he issued the first government permit for the commercial application of irradiation for spice sterilization.

Until that day, having no interest in the business aspects of food science, I had never heard of Hunt Foods. Driving back to Davis, a fellow food scientist told more about the company and recommended that I accept the offer because Hunt was a major food processor with a good reputation for its research activity. When I discussed this job opportunity with Marika, we realized that during our seven-year residency in the States we had mostly lived in small university communities and had hardly met anyone outside academia. We concluded that perhaps it was a good time to experience how “average” Americans lived. I accepted the offer. In April 1964, we moved to Fullerton and during the following six years I worked as a project leader at Hunt-Wesson Foods.

Even today, I still wonder what my future career would have been if I had stepped into the next elevator on that morning?

***Our Time in Southern California, Fullerton:
1964-1970***

Marika and the boys stayed in Davis for a few more weeks while I settled in a motel near Disneyland. As I walked in Anaheim alone among the Sunday evening crowd, I wanted to return immediately to Davis and enjoy the quiet civilized place we often complained about. Next morning, however, I was very impressed on entering Hunt's headquarter building to settle formalities and deal with human relations. The beautiful new building had been designed by a famous local architect. The president of the company was Norton Simon, a well-known art collector; today, many of the famous paintings he acquired are exhibited in the Norton Simon museum in Pasadena. Then, his artworks were on display all over the corporate offices. For example, the office walls where I signed my insurance papers were covered with famous original Matisse bronze reliefs.

On entering the nearby research facilities, however, I experienced a shock. The "laboratory" was situated at the corner of an old cannery, separated from noisy cannery lines only by thin partitions. All research personnel shared a common office and laboratory space. Moreover, I soon found out that any assignment had to be completed within weeks; otherwise the project would have been considered a failure. Eventually, I was freed from such pressures. As a plant physiologist, I was assigned to solve tomato-growing problems and my supervisor accepted that plant experiments require time and patience. A couple of years later when I had completed the plant research assignments, I learned that recognition in a food processing company can be gained only through new product development and I switched to conducting such projects. By that time, better research facilities had been built, providing advanced equipment and more appealing surroundings. I led a group of 10 junior food technologists that successfully developed several new products; some of

them, like hamburger helper, snack-pack fruits and canned puddings, are still marketed. It appears that members of my group liked me, because over the past 42 Christmases I have received greetings from most of my former assistants. One younger colleague whom I hired out of school even named his daughter after Marika, a unique name in Oregon.

We purchased our first house in Fullerton—another amazing economic achievement for the time. As a university employee, I had belonged to the California State retirement program instead of the national Social Security system. Given my only two year's employment with the state, waiting until retirement to cash in this fund was impractical. However, the sum of the 2-year retirement saving covered the down payment for the purchase of a decent house. Conveniently, our new home was only two miles from my office and thus I did not have to deal with the notorious Los Angeles area traffic.

Soon we received unexpected good news. The Communist government of Hungary had become a bit more liberal, allowing older people to travel to the free world. One could never anticipate how long such a friendlier atmosphere would prevail, and we did not anticipate that a visit to Hungary would ever become an option for us. Therefore we decided to proceed with a reunion because we were afraid that there might be only a brief opportunity for our parents to meet Peter and George.

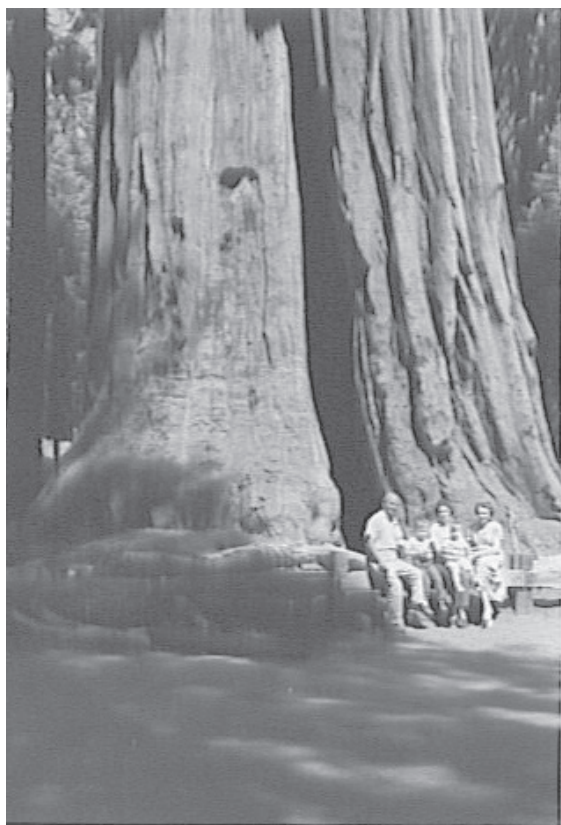
The logistics were complicated because, except for Jenő papa, none of the family had traveled by air before; my mother, especially, was very reluctant to fly, given that even crossing the Danube to go from Buda to Pest caused her anxiety. The other problem was financial. Before the advances of the jet-era, transatlantic flights were very expensive. I had just started earning a decent income when I joined Hunt Foods, and our new house still had only sparse furnishing. Nevertheless, we invited our parents to visit us. I obtained a loan to finance their travel; for

four people, the travel costs exceeded my annual gross income.

We could only afford to purchase the least expensive modes of transportation for them. From Budapest they traveled by train to Luxemburg with two transfers. From Luxemburg they flew on an Icelandic Airlines propeller-driven plane to New York, with a stopover in Reykjavik; finally from New York to Los Angeles, they flew by jet.

My parents spent about six weeks with us. After eight years of separation we had a joyous and emotional reunion; except for one incident. Peter at age 5 spoke fluent Hungarian. When he welcomed my mother with his English accented Hungarian she laughed and asked him to repeat it because she loved hearing his accent. At that point Peter ceased using Hungarian as a first or second language, although even today he still understands every word.

We took a trip with them to Sequoia National Park. Back in Budapest, my father wrote a magazine article about the California Redwoods. At that time, very few, if any, Hungarian visitors had had a chance to see such distant national parks.



Family Photo in Sequoia National Park, 1964

My father even took a solo trip to San Francisco by Greyhound bus alone, because I had just started a new job and had not earned any vacation time yet. He liked the adventure of traveling alone and it did not concern him that he did not speak even a single word of English. An interesting coincidence happened on this trip. I asked a Hungarian friend to take care of him during his stay in the San Francisco area. Like my father, he was a horticulturist and worked in the Blake Gardens, owned by the University of California at Berkeley. My father was very impressed with the gardens' arboretum and after his return he told us enthusiastic stories about the garden, which has full views

of San Francisco Bay. I had never heard of Blake Gardens until then and could not imagine that merely six years later we would be living very close to it.

Marika's parents arrived a few weeks after my parents' departure. Bőzsi mama brought along her apron and Hungarian cookbook and took charge of the meals; for the next two months we were very well fed. At that time the benefit of physical exercise had not yet been established. Nobody in our neighborhood ever walked. Jenő papa did not look like a criminal, and even insisted on wearing a suit and tie all the time. Despite his distinguished appearance, people called the police several times, saying that a suspicious looking man was walking by and a potential crime might be happening. Moreover, he did not have a driver's license, so, sometimes he was escorted home by the police.

Jenő papa had broad interests. He read the Los Angeles Times daily using a dictionary. The Times' classified ads substantiated his earlier wish that Marika should have married an accountant. He found numerous openings for accountants advertised, but not even a single listing for a food scientist.

After 1968, we were able to visit our parents in Budapest several times; nevertheless, we are pleased that at least on one occasion they experienced our enviable surroundings and wonderful existence in California.

Starting in 1964, we lived in Southern California for six years. We did not dislike living there, but never felt that we wanted to stay there permanently. We had several good friends in the area, but a full hour was required to get to their homes to visit them; therefore, we had to devote a full day to make a visit worthwhile. The cultural life was attractive. Several world-class museums, arboretums and most importantly the music center were accessible. Zubin Mehta had just become the music director and we heard many great soloists in the newly completed music center.

Also, the area had excellent theatres, and several famous actors appeared in plays. Among the theatre performances we attended were those with Ingrid Bergman, Elizabeth Taylor, Jack Lemon, and many other famous Hollywood actors. The British National Theatre performed every year in the Ahmanson theatre with such famous actors as Lawrence Olivier, Maggie Smith and Vanessa Redgrave. No local opera company had been formed yet, but for a few years the San Francisco Opera, followed by the New York City Opera and the Boston Opera companies, performed regularly in Los Angeles. The New York City Opera in particular had excellent casts, including Beverly Sills and Norman Treigle, and we witnessed the U.S. debut of the young Placido Domingo in *Bomarzo*, an opera by the Argentinean composer Alberto Ginastera.

My position at Hunt's did not offer any potential for advancement. Virgil hired outstanding people as project leaders, but when openings for a higher position occurred he always found someone from outside rather than promoting from within the ranks. Therefore, after a few years I as well as most of my peers was looking for other positions. In late 1969, major management changes took place at Hunt: Virgil was fired and I was experiencing bad vibes from people unfriendly to me at the company and therefore decided to look for a new job.

Settling in Kensington: 1970-?

Ever since our first visit to San Francisco we had wanted to live there. In 1970, I accepted a research director position at Vacu-Dry Company in Emeryville, across the Bay from San Francisco. Given the unfortunate company name, most people assumed that I would be working for a vacuum cleaner manufacturer; however, it was a food company. The name derived from the company's unique vacuum drying process for producing low-moisture fruits. The company existed for over 30 years, although frequently on the brink of bankruptcy.

At the time of my arrival Vacu-Dry was doing well financially because it was supplying shelf-stable food for the Armed Forces in the Vietnam War. Also, DuPont Company was considering entry into the food ingredient supply business and was holding discussions about Vacu-Dry's potential acquisition. DuPont had implied that the company should upgrade its technical capability and thus the company was seeking a qualified scientist and offered me the job. I was well aware of the potential risks involved, but I could not turn the job down, given my precarious position at Hunt and Vacu-Dry's attractive offer, which included a management role and—best of all—the opportunity of relocating to the Bay Area. Marika and I spent a long time looking for housing. As luck would have it, we found a great place in Kensington—our present home for 43 years. At the time of purchase we could not really afford the house and as a result struggled financially for years, but eventually it became the best investment we ever made.

In 1973, Vacu-Dry ceased to supply food to the military, and DuPont decided against acquiring a food ingredient company⁹. From that point on Vacu-Dry's financial crisis worsened, rapidly

9 Thirty-nine years later, in 2012 DuPont finally decided to acquire two food ingredient companies Danisco Inc. and Solae LCC. A few years after my departure Vacu-Dry Company was acquired by Tree Top Inc.

progressing to its filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and the loss of my job—the first and only time I experienced a setback in my career. Cutting research positions is usually the first step companies make to save costs; doing so, is a poor choice, however, because such action is reducing chances for eventual recovery.

We decided to ignore immediate employment opportunities in the Mid West. We highly valued our house, our location and our proximity to many good friends. Moreover, uprooting the boys and entering them in new schools would have had disadvantages. At the same time we had no cash reserve; I did not even know how I could pay for the next month's mortgage installment. For eight months I could not find a permanent job in the Bay Area, although I did have a few temporary consulting jobs. Herbert Stone was especially helpful by offering temporary assignments at Stanford Research Institute (SRI). I had a very positive experience working at SRI, but I had to wait quite a while before I was offered regular employment there.

On the light side, at 10 AM on weekdays the classical music radio station had a music quiz. When I worked, I could not participate in it. On my first day of unemployment I answered the day's question correctly and received tickets for a \$500 a plate fundraising dinner for the Conservatory of Music held at the Fairmont hotel (that amount was much greater than the usual prizes). We were seated among San Francisco's high society, with Debby Reynolds sitting next to me. Most attendees knew each other and probably wondered who we were (possibly newly affluent art patrons?). We did not reveal that we had won the tickets and in fact didn't even know how we could afford to purchase groceries the following day.

In the fall of 1976, I found a local opportunity. Eileen Feathers and her husband was a multimillionaire couple who made their fortune by developing exercise equipment. They decided to market healthy soda drinks and were looking for a food scientist to

formulate those products. I had an unusual job interview. They lived in Monterey in a house on the famous 17-mile drive and they sent their private airplane for me. On arrival to the Monterey airport a limousine picked me up and, cordial person that I am, I started a conversation with the driver, who was like the pilot, a full time employee of the Feathers. I found out that this driver was the brother of a former Hungarian Prime Minister, Kállay Miklós, who tried to keep Hungary neutral during WWII. I could never have anticipated being driven by someone with such an impressive family background.

My interview was held in the Feathers' beachfront living room, which was decorated with many paintings, among them one by Van Dyke. The Feathers hired me and I started organizing a laboratory in Hayward, working for them for about 18 months and creating some good protein-fortified cola drinks. At regular intervals I flew to Monterey on their private jet to demonstrate the progress of my work. However, the timing was not right for selling a "healthy" soda at a premium price and the product never reached the market.

When I received a regular job offer from SRI in 1976, I had mixed feelings about leaving the Feathers' venture after such brief employment because they had been quite gracious to me. But they approved my decision, telling me that I deserved to work at a prestigious institute. Except for the long commute between Kensington and Menlo Park, working at SRI was very appealing. Soon after joining the group I had assignments in Utrecht, Holland and London, followed by frequent travels both within the United States and abroad. I was able to visit my aging parents during European business travel. At the same time, I entered into an independent consulting contract with the Finnish Sugar Company. Also, Marika started her successful jewelry business; finally, for the first time we had become free of debt and in fact had surplus money. To secure our surplus income during the prevailing high inflation, we purchased a weekend

house at Lake Tahoe, which we enjoyed over the next 20 years.

Soon, I received a product development assignment from *Cerveceria Quautemuc*, a Mexican brewery, to formulate a lemon-lime flavor alcoholic beverage based on brewing technology. Even though I had made good progress in this work, the company discontinued the project. My good friends Joel Sidel, Herbert Stone, and I decided to sell the invention to another brewing company. Olympia brewing company was interested, and we signed an attractive contract. I had to devote full time to this project and took a leave of absence from SRI. We founded ETEL, Inc. a product development corporation. Olympia supported the product development work generously and we had a royalty-sharing agreement when the product was sold. The bench work proceeded rapidly, but moving a new process from the laboratory to large-scale production always presents a challenge.

After spending two years on this project, disaster struck as a result of an unrelated event. Olympia was family-owned and the president was a family member who fully supported our project. One holiday morning when I opened the San Francisco Chronicle, I saw a front-page article about Olympia's president: he had been arrested for homosexual activity on the grounds of Washington State Capitol, near the Olympia brewery. After this scandal he resigned, and his uncle became company president. Unfortunately, the new president had a different marketing concept and our new product, although almost ready for market introduction, was put on hold. For the next two years Olympia paid the fees established in our contract, but the project was shelved. A few years later Olympia was sold. At that point we were free to sell the product elsewhere but we could not find an interested firm. I ended up as president of ETEL Inc. and its laboratory facility. From the Olympia payments we purchased another vacation property at Monterey Dunes.

After Olympia discontinued supporting ETEL Inc., I operated it

with modest financial success. Our annual average income was good, but there were frequent ups and downs in project assignments. Moreover, because my partners had other business interests, I was running the place alone. Eventually I worked one-half time for the Finnish Sugar Company as vice president to oversee their U.S. business interests. Concurrently, I undertook some interesting projects such as developing Dole's juice blend products, and an ice cream with very high fruit content. (My grandchildren are still loyal consumers of Dole's pineapple-orange juice blend, calling it "Papa Juice".)

At the same time I was involved in SRI projects as an outside contractor and I realized that working by myself at ETEL I was missing regular daily contact with colleagues. Besides missing my friendly colleagues, I even began missing those who were less friendly as well. After dissolving ETEL, I returned to full-time employment at SRI. I even rejoined my friends in a carpool I had left many years before. I was 57 years old and decided that I would not make any more employment changes until retirement.

By this time SRI's food science group had ceased to exist; my new position involved providing business consulting in the food additives area. Business consulting, as opposed to technology, was a new field for me and quite attractive in a sense that in my projects I was in contact with high-level company executives. These contacts turned out to be of great advantage after retirement: Beginning the very first week of retirement in 1998, I was asked to conduct consulting assignments without any solicitation on my part; during the past 15 years of "retirement," I have been working without interruption. Until 9/11, I worked for the U.S. Agency of International Development in Lebanon and Egypt, and my frequent trips to those Middle Eastern countries proved extremely interesting. In addition to the work I had to conduct there, I was able to explore the great historic sites in these countries, places where only few tourists can go.

Today, I continue to update SRI's food chemical related market reports on an annual or biannual basis. I also benefit from my 20-year association with GNLD International, a nutritional supplement company. I serve as a member of GNLD's Scientific Advisory Board, a position that requires knowledge of recent advances in human nutrition. GNLD operates in 30 countries, including Hungary; as a result, I have had several opportunities to deliver scientific lectures there in Hungarian¹⁰. In addition, I consult for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and for numerous private clients and have authored several book chapters on food additives.

The Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) was the only professional organization in which I participated. The IFT membership numbers about 27,000 food professionals consisting of university faculty, government and industry research personnel and marketing experts. IFT's annual meetings rotate among various cities. Between 1968 and 2012, I attended every annual meeting. Besides the lecture series and exhibitions we enjoyed lavish receptions given by suppliers and the opportunity to meet with former colleagues and network with others. I became active on various IFT committees that required participation in meetings, which were usually held in Chicago. I was elected a Fellow of IFT in 1990, an honor given to fewer than 3% of the membership. In 2001 I was one of the two nominees for the presidency of the Institute. Fortunately, I lost the election to my friendly professor opponent. I say "fortunately," because his term started on September 1, 2001 and soon after 9/11 he had to lay off many IFT employees because the value of the society's endowment had diminished. It was a very unpleasant task for him immediately after becoming president.

10 When after 40 years I delivered my first Hungarian lecture in Budapest, I started my presentation telling the audience: "I had given this same talk several times in English with a Hungarian accent. Now I will present my talk in archaic Hungarian".

As far as my native country is concerned - I received a late recognition. I became a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an honor I could not anticipate when I was not accepted at the university of my choice after high school graduation. - Also in 2006 I returned to my alma mater to receive a golden diploma at the 50th anniversary of my university graduation: "*Ritorna vincitor*". This event had a personal meaning for me. I cherish a photo showing my father receiving his golden anniversary diploma at the same university auditorium.

IFT NEWS

(Continued)

Seven Professional Members Named Fellow of the Institute at the 1990 IFT Annual Meeting



Laszlo P. Somogyi

...was nominated for his "outstanding and extraordinary accomplishments" in the field of food science and technology, and for his active participation in IFT, particularly as a member of the Northern California Section. Now a Senior Consultant for SRI International in Menlo Park, Calif., Somogyi received his B.S. degree in horticulture in 1956 from the University of Agricultural Sciences in Budapest, Hungary, his native land. In 1962, he earned M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in plant physiology from Rutgers University (N.J.) before beginning a distinguished career in food science following a postdoctoral fellowship in radiation biology at the University of California—Davis.

He has worked as a Project Leader for Hunt-Wesson Foods, as Director of Research and Development for Vacu-Dry Company, as a Senior Food Scientist for Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International), as Vice President of Finn-Cal, Inc. (now Finnsugar Biochemicals), and as a food industry consultant for ETEL, Inc. and SRI International. During this time, he developed low moisture snacks for Weight Watchers and a line of fruit dessert filling mixes, both of which have been on the market since 1972. He also developed, among other products, fruit ingredients for breakfast cereals and the concept of fruit snacks

leading to successful commercial products. He assisted the California Prune Board and the Wild Blueberry Association to develop marketing programs, and also helped design a new processing plant for peeled garlic, pesto sauce, and other projects. He is author or coauthor of more than 35 research papers and textbooks on the subjects of food ingredients, food processing technologies, fruit quality, food irradiation, and plant nutrition.

For IFT, Somogyi has contributed extensively to regional sections and divisions. A Professional Member of the Institute since 1964, he has served on the IFT Awards Committee, and is currently a member of the Scientific Lectureship Committee. In the Northern California Section he has held numerous offices and committee chairmanships, including Councilor, Executive Secretary, Membership Secretary, and Program Chairman. He was Chairman of the section from 1987 to 1988. In 1984, he was selected "Outstanding Member" of the Northern California Section. He was also a member of the Southern California Section from 1964 to 1972, and is a member of the Fruit & Vegetable Products Division and the Food Service Division, where he worked with the Arrangements Committee for the First, Second, and Third Annual Foodservice Conferences (1986-88).

Food Technology magazine August 1990 issue

During the past 25 years, our most enjoyable activity has been our frequent travel and by now we have visited five continents. As a high school student in Hungary my desire for travel was initiated by my dear high school teacher Dr. Gyula Grexa. We subsequently visited all the famous sites in France, Italy and Spain

that we had learned about in his fascinating stories. Marika and I made a strong commitment to frequent travel around age 50. At that time, when we were traveling down the Nile River in Egypt, we noted that several of our companions, New Yorkers in their 70s and 80s, had obviously worked hard so that they could enjoy travel during retirement. But they did not have the energy to leave the ship to see the incredible sites along our route; instead, they just stayed on the boat, exhausted from the heat. Marika and I promised each other that we would not delay our global travel until we were unable to enjoy it fully and that we would make two trips annually from then on. We have kept that promise, traveling to many countries on five continents. Marika still wants to go to Antarctica to see her favorite birds, and I am sure we will fulfill her wish some day.

Living in our Kensington house for over 40 years has had many advantages. We enjoy living in the Bay Area, given its many cultural opportunities, which we try to take full advantage of, and we are still finding new sites in the area that we have not yet explored. Just as importantly, I feel very fortunate that during these years I have developed and maintained close friendships with many wonderful people.

Since 1995 our family has grown, and we are very fortunate to have three wonderful grandchildren—Rianna, Matthew (Matyi) and Jenelle. Having grandchildren has been a great reward at this stage of our life. I wish they lived nearby, but enjoying them at holidays provides a special treat for us. We have also shared some memorable vacations with them.



**Vacationing in Santa Barbara in August 2005,
One of rare photos showing the entire family**

I assured the reader at the beginning of this story that, following my very depressing start, I would present a delightful conclusion—one even better than my most optimistic anticipations. First of all, Marika's devoted support and companionship have been wonderful and second, Peter and George still share their life experiences with us, and we can always expect their calls. I have been lucky that in every stage of my life I have found good, supportive friends.

Also, I have been very lucky in making what turned out to be good choices. Most of the time, at the moment of making a certain choice, one does not realize that it will affect the rest of one's life. On a few occasions I did recognize that moment, and that was scary. Fortunately, in retrospect, I made mostly good decisions.



**My 80th Birthday Celebration at Yosemite Parks' Wawona
Hotel, June 2011**

Many individuals have helped me to survive, learn, achieve my personal goals and shape my character. The chronological list below expresses my gratitude to these individuals:

Boldizsár Iván and Josette, saved my life during the Nazi era
 Raoul Wallenberg, saved the lives of many Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust, including me
 Strasser Klári and László, helped me after the siege of Budapest and shared their nominal food supply
 Grexa Gyula, my teacher, influenced my taste in music, literature and world travel
 Probocskay Endre, university dean in Budapest, arranged my university entrance despite the prevailing Communist rules
 Unknown Hungarian peasants, risked their lives or freedom for assisting our escape
 Gerda Frey, created the opportunity for us to emigrate to America
 Tamás Imre, conducted a difficult search to find me and whose contact led to my first professional employment in America at Cornell University
 Jean P. Nitsch, hired me at Cornell University, initiating my professional career
 Norman F. Childers, accepted me for graduate studies and awarded me a fellowship at Rutgers University
 Virgil Wodicka, engaged me for the first food industry position at Hunt-Wesson Foods
 Howard Schutz, his recommendation for a management position led to the opportunity to settle in the San Francisco Bay Area
 Herbert Stone, hired me at SRI International, initiating the most rewarding years of my professional career
 Michael Smith, for 12 years shared with me the long commute between Berkeley and Menlo Park, without a single disagreement; he edited and improved many of my technical reports as well as this life story
 Special thanks to Monique and Tony Long for spending countless hours editing this work.

**Most of all, Marika,
and my family
Peter, George, Rianna, Matthew and Jenelle;
They have contributed to the enjoyment of my extremely
wonderful life**

I am particularly grateful for all of them.



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All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

J.R.R. Tolkien,